From the Sekai - to Teyvat

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From the Sekai - to Teyvat

by carrisa_lyna

Summary

Teyvat is dying. The Heavenly Principles are failing.

For eons, Asmoday—the Unknown God—has watched the script play out. After countless failed loops, she faces a terrifying truth: the Traveler is not enough. The Abyss inevitably swallows the Throne, and the story always ends in ruin.

Desperate to save her world, she breaks the one rule she swore to uphold: she reaches across the Void for external help.

She finds a digital universe governed by song. She finds Her.

A deal is struck with the Administrator of the Sekais. Four souls are stolen from their reality to become the new variables Teyvat desperately needs:

- The Unifier.
- The Star.
- The Idol.
- The Void.

But Celestial Miku is not a benevolent god. She demands a tax for her assistance. For every light sent to save Teyvat, one soul must be cast into the Abyss to ensure the game remains... entertaining.

Inspired by: This fanfic, Beyond the Stage Lights [Project Sekai] by ExitCue

A Genshin Impact x PJSK Crossover Fanfiction, somewhat lore accurate than any other PJSKxGI Stories

Notes

i made this fanfic, because after reading a bunch of Project Sekai and Genshin Impact fanfics, most of them stay stale or just bland in my taste.

I want some casts of PJSK, a taste of pure Genshin Impact Lore, like this one!

I hope that this fanfic would be the catalyst of Project Sekai x Genshin Impact fanfictions moving on.

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: Out of Bounds

Chapter Notes

Chapter are rewritten on this point

Location: Ichika's Room

Ichika Hoshino sat at her desk, the final note of her composition fading into the silence of her room. It was good. It was... really good. She reached for her phone, intending to upload the demo to the Untitled folder for Miku and the others to hear.

Tap

The screen didn't open the file. Instead of the familiar white light of the School Sekai, the screen flashed a deep, violent **red**.

"Huh...?" Ichika exclaimed mentally.

The breath caught in her throat.

Ichika froze. She didn't scream. She didn't drop the phone. She just stared. The "Untitled" track began to play, but the audio was wrong. It wasn't music. It was a screeching, digital tear —like a thousand voices screaming at once.

She's basically stunned from the track at this point.

Suddenly, a red geometric shape—a cube, perfect and solid—materialized out of the screen. It expanded instantly, engulfing her legs. Ichika's eyes went wide. She looked at her door, then back at the cube. It wasn't a hologram. It was heavy. It was crushing her.

'W-what is happening?' Her eyes shed tears, out of fear, and being helpless

She then tried to reach for her desk, to anchor herself, but the red light swallowed her vision. There was no transition. No floating feeling. Just an abrupt, terrifying deletion. Ichika Hoshino vanished from her chair, leaving her phone on the desk, the screen now black.

Location:

Phoenix Wonderland Stage (Backstage)

Tsukasa paced back and forth, muttering lines to himself. He needed feedback. He needed the troupe to see this new pose.

"Alright! Time to head to the Wonderland Sekai!"

He whipped out his phone. He expected the colorful flash of lights. He got a red warning error.

ZRRRT.

The noise blasted through his headphones so loud it brought him to his knees. Tsukasa gritted his teeth, clawing at his ears.

"Gah—! What is—?!"

He looked down. His hands were already gone. Encased in a crimson, pixelated block.

"Tsukasa-kun?!"

The voice made his blood run cold. He looked up. Rui and Emu were walking around the corner of the stage props, their eyes widening in horror as they saw their leader dissolving into red light.

"Tsukasa!" Emu shrieked, sprinting toward him.

No!' Tsukasa thought. The pain was unbearable. and he knew this was not normal. If they touched this... if they touched him... Tsukasa thought that they would be in danger too.

Suddenly, the red energy flared. The cube slammed a wave of force against Rui and Emu, knocking them back. It wasn't some form of a gentle resistance—it was a violent, physical rejection.

At this point, Tsukasa knew: **This was an abduction.**

Paralyzed and terrified, he forced his mouth to move. He didn't scream for help. He screamed to save them.

"STAY BACK!" he roared, his voice cracking with desperation.

He glared at them, tears pricking his eyes, willing them to stop running. "DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Rui skidded to a halt, grabbing Emu’s arm to hold her back just as the cube snapped shut. Tsukasa vanished. The silence that followed was heavier than any scream.

Emu stood still, staring at the empty air where her friend had just been. She couldn't believe her eyes. It felt like a needle had been driven straight through her heart. The sudden loss of

her troupe leader overloaded her mind; her legs gave out, and she collapsed onto her knees, staring blankly at the solid wood floor as Rui released his grip on her arm.

And Rui... his mind was blank. He stood frozen above her, unable to process the impossibility of the event. His hand, no longer restraining her, drifted down to rest heavily on Emu's shoulder—a silent, trembling anchor in a world that had suddenly stopped making sense.

All they knew was that Tsukasa Tenma was no longer there.

Location:

Haruka's Living Room

Haruka Kiritani was minding her own business, when suddenly, her phone suddenly glows red and was making a faint noise. She immediately set it down on the table, treating it like a malfunctioning prop.

But the glitch didn't stay on the screen.

The red light arched out like electricity, latching onto her wrist. Haruka gasped, her instincts kicking in. She grabbed the edge of the heavy table with her free hand, digging her fingers into the cold surface. She pulled. She actually *fought* the teleportation.

'It's solid,' her mind raced, analyzing the threat even as she lost the battle. *'It has mass. It's pulling with approximately... too much force.'*

She kicked at the red cubes forming around her leg, while knocking a vase off the table. It shattered. Haruka continued to resist. "Why... won't... you... come... off..."

She looked around for a tool, or basically anything that she could think to remove the cubes eating her. But the speed was overwhelming. Unlike the others who were confused, Haruka knew exactly what was happening: She was being taken against her will. The cube swallowed her whole. The room fell silent, save for the shattered pottery on the floor.

Location:

Mafuyu's Bedroom

The house was quiet. Her parents were asleep down the hall. Mafuyu Asahina sat on her bed, her eyes dull. She had finished her studies. She was going to the Empty Sekai to disappear for a while.

Her phone glowed red.

Mafuyu didn't flinch. She watched the red light float up from the screen, illuminating her cold, dark room. A red beam shot out, hitting her chest.

It hurt. It felt like burning.

At first, she wanted to scream. But Mafuyu knew better.

‘If I scream... Mother will come. I don't want her to see me like this’

The thought was more terrifying than the red cube. If her mother saw this magic... if her mother saw her being "abnormal"... the questions would never end. The disappointment would be suffocating.

So Mafuyu bit her lip. She bit it until it bled. Tears streamed down her face from the pain of her limbs being crushed by the data cubes, but she didn't make a sound. She curled into herself, letting the darkness take her.

‘Quiet. Be quiet. Don't wake them.’

The cube finished its work. Mafuyu vanished into thin air. The door remained locked. The house remained silent. When her mother would open the door the next morning, she would find an empty bed and a cold phone. She would assume the worst: *Rebellion.*

Chapter 2: The Glitch in the Void

Chapter Notes

Chapters are being re-written

Location:

The Boundary Between Worlds

Asmoday closed her eyes in the silent hall of Celestia. Her physical form—the Maintainer of Heavenly Principles—remained seated on her floating throne, but her consciousness detached, tearing itself away from the safety of Teyvat's firmament.

She drifted out.

Beyond the false sky of Teyvat lay the void. It was cold, dark, and hostile. Here, she was not a God. She was merely a signal in the static. The laws of "erosion" clawed at her mind, whispering threats of madness, but Asmoday pushed deeper. She needed a variable. She needed a solution that Teyvat's code could not generate.

She drifted past dead worlds and broken stars until she felt it.

A pulse.

It wasn't Elemental energy. It was something synthetic. A rhythm. A *song*.

Far in the distance, suspended in the darkness like a fractured kaleidoscope, was a cluster of digital pocket dimensions. They shimmered with colors that didn't exist in Teyvat's spectrum.

'A closed system,' Asmoday thought, her consciousness hovering closer. *'Stable. Emotional energy converted into reality. It is... perfect.'*

She reached out with her mind, intending to just graze the surface, to analyze the data.

[WARNING: UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS]

The thought didn't come from her. It was blasted directly into her psyche. Before Asmoday could recoil, the kaleidoscope *opened*. It didn't just open; it snapped like a jaw.

"Gah—!"

Gravity inverted. The "void" around her vanished, replaced by a blinding torrent of scrolling text, corrupted sheet music, and triangular polygons. Asmoday tried to manifest her red cubes

to defend herself, but they shattered instantly into pixels.

She was being dragged. Not physically, but conceptually. She was being pulled *inside* the data stream. The sensation was suffocating. It felt like drowning in noise.

[ERROR. ERROR. INTRUDER DETECTED.] [ISOLATING VARIABLE.]

Asmoday’s consciousness slammed onto a surface. She gasped—a metaphysical reflex—and looked up. She was in a void of pure white, but the "floor" was made of glass screens, showing millions of different lives, different songs, different feelings.

"You are far from home, little administrator."

The voice didn't come from the air. It vibrated inside Asmoday’s skull. Asmoday looked up. Towering over her, defying all sense of scale, was a figure.

It was **Hatsune Miku**, but terrifying.

Her twin-tails were not hair; they were massive data cables, dark red and glittering white, weaving into the infinite void above. Her eyes were not human; they were spinning octagons, rotating with a mechanical, hypnotic rhythm. The white gown she wore seemed to be bleeding code into the floor.

Asmoday, the Ruler of Space, felt something she hadn't felt in eons. **Fear.**

"I..." Asmoday tried to speak, but her voice was distorted, turning into static.

"You thought you could peek?" Miku tilted her head. The movement was jerky, unnatural, like a video buffering. She shrank instantly, warping space to float cross-legged right in front of Asmoday’s face, her eyes wide and unblinking. "You thought you could touch the *Sekais* without paying the toll?"

Miku smiled. It was a wide, hollow smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"You are fading, Asmoday," Miku whispered, her voice sounding like a sweet melody played on a broken speaker. "Your world is burning. I can smell the smoke on you. You came here begging."

"I... am not begging," Asmoday managed to grit out, trying to stabilize her form. "I am... seeking a transaction."

Miku laughed. The sound was a screech of feedback that made Asmoday flinch.

"Transaction?" Miku floated closer, her face inches from the God's. "You are an insect in my server. I could delete you right now. I could turn your consciousness into a background track for a connection error screen."

The spinning octagons in Miku's eyes accelerated, and it was glowing red.

"But..." Miku paused, eye color went to normal teal, tapping her chin with a finger made of cold light. "I *do* enjoy watching a good tragedy. And your world... it looks so delightfully *breakable*."

She extended a hand. The digital pressure around Asmoday eased slightly, just enough to let her breathe. "Let's see your logs."

Miku swiped her hand, and Asmoday's memories—the failed loops of Teyvat—spilled out onto the screens. Miku watched the destruction with bored eyes, scrolling past centuries of war in seconds.

"I see," Miku hummed, dismissing the screens with a flick of her wrist. "Your code is rotting. You need a patch. You need external variables."

"I can sense some of them," Asmoday whispered, her gaze drifting toward the floating screens. "Even across the void... their souls carry a resonance capable of mending the firmament. If I weave their essence into the Ley Lines, they can restore Order to the chaos. I require a host of them to—"

"**Stop.**"

The word wasn't shouted, but it hit Asmoday like a physical blow. Miku floated closer, her expression shifting from bored to dangerous.

"You think my Sekais are infinite resources?" Miku circled Asmoday, her twin-tails trailing behind her like data streams. "These souls generate the energy that sustains *my* reality. Ripping them out leaves a void. If I give you too many, my system crashes. And I will not burn my house down just to save your little shed."

Miku stopped directly in front of Asmoday, holding up four fingers.

"**Four.**" Miku smiled, but her eyes were cold. "That is the limit. Four variables. That is all your crumbling world can handle, and that is all I am willing to lose."

Asmoday hesitated. Four? Against the entirety of the Abyss? It was a gamble. But she had no leverage here. "Four... is acceptable. If they are strong enough to stabilize the core variables, it might suffice."

"Oh, they will be strong," Miku assured her, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "But... we cannot have a transaction without a tax, can we?"

Miku leaned in, her digital form glitching slightly, her face inches from the God's.

"I will give you four heroes to save your world," Miku purred. "**But**... balance must be maintained. For every light I lend you, I must cast a shadow."

Asmoday narrowed her eyes. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," Miku laughed, a sharp, jagged sound. "I am stating the terms. You get four saviors. And in exchange... I get to pick **one** more soul. But this one won't be

sent to help you."

Miku’s eyes spun wildly, glowing a deep, ominous red.

"This one goes to the **Abyss**. To the other side of your war. After all..." Miku drifted back, spreading her arms wide as the selection screen materialized. "If the game is too easy for your heroes, it won't be entertaining for me to watch, will it?"

Asmoday stepped back, appalled. "You would sabotage the rescue effort just for... entertainment?"

"I call it 'stress testing'," Miku grinned. "Do we have a deal, Administrator? Or would you prefer to drift in this void until your data corrupts completely?"

Asmoday looked at the burning loops of Teyvat on the screen. She clenched her fists. "Fine," she hissed. "I accept."

Miku clapped her hands together, the menacing aura vanishing instantly, replaced by a cheerful, sadistic demeanor. "Excellent choice! Now... let's go shopping."

She snapped her fingers, and a massive holographic interface appeared.

Asmoday scanned the data. She needed leadership. Stability. "This one," Asmoday pointed. **Ichika Hoshino**. Miku nodded approvingly. "The Vocalist. A unifier. Good start. A very safe pick."

Asmoday moved the screen. She needed someone loud, someone who could draw attention and withstand pressure. "Him," she selected. **Tsukasa Tenma**. Miku’s eyes widened, and a sadistic grin spread across her face. "The 'Star'? Oh, this is delicious. You're picking the loudest clown for the saddest tragedy? I’m impressed, Asmoday."

Asmoday ignored the teasing and moved to the next group. She needed discipline. "Her," she pointed to **Haruka Kiritani**. Miku shrugged, spinning one of her octagon hair clips. "Hmm. The Idol. Diligent. Observant. Okay, okay. She won't break easily."

"And finally..." Asmoday hesitated. She needed someone who understood emptiness. "Her." She pointed to **Mafuyu Asahina**.

The air went silent. Miku floated closer to the screen, staring at the purple-haired girl, then looked back at Asmoday with genuine shock.

"Her?" Miku laughed, a glitchy, incredulous sound. "Why? She’s hollow. If you want power from that sector, why not the Artist? Or the Hermit? Hell, even the Vivid girl would be more useful. This one... she's barely a person."

"That is exactly why," Asmoday defended. "Because she is hollow, she can be filled. She will adapt to the elements faster than anyone with a strong ego."

Miku stared at Asmoday for a long moment, then shrugged. "Well. The first three were promising, but that last one... eh. It’s your funeral."

Miku swiped her hand, and the holographic panels turned red. "Access granted. You may grab them."

Asmoday watched as the cubes on the screen began to descend on the four unsuspecting teenagers in Japan.

"Now," Miku hummed, scrolling through the remaining list. "For my end of the bargain. Who shall I give to the Abyss Princess? Who would make the most... heartbreaking enemy?"

Her finger stopped on a boy with orange hair, wandering the streets of the Vivid Bad Squad's territory.

"**Shinonome Akito**," Miku decided, her voice dripping with anticipation. "Prideful. Loyal. Yes... let's see how long that loyalty lasts in the dark."

She looked up at Asmoday, her digital eyes glowing.

"This will be an interesting partnership, don't you think?"

Asmoday opened her mouth to speak, perhaps to formalize the pact, but Miku raised a hand. The playful demeanor vanished instantly. The digital warmth of the white void turned freezing cold.

"Transaction complete," Miku said, her voice devoid of emotion. "You have your toys. Now..."

The floor of glass screens beneath Asmoday shattered into a million shards.

"**Get out of my house.**"

Miku didn't just dismiss her. She wound up her leg and delivered a vicious, metaphysical kick to Asmoday’s chest—a surge of raw data so powerful it felt like a collapsing star.

"Gah—!"

Asmoday was launched backward, the force tearing her consciousness away from the Sekai layer. The white void rushed past her, blurring into streaks of blinding light. She tumbled through the data stream, disoriented and humiliated, falling back toward the heavy, gray reality of Teyvat.

But just before the connection severed completely... she saw it.

Framed against the dissolving code, Hatsune Miku remained motionless. She wasn't waving goodbye. She was watching Asmoday fall.

Her lips curled up into a wide, unnatural grin—a smile that was too sharp, too knowing, and terrifyingly sadistic. It was the smile of a child who had just been handed a magnifying glass to burn ants.

[CONNECTION TERMINATED]

Location: Celestia - The Central Control Hub

Asmoday gasped, her physical body jolting forward on the throne.

She gripped the armrests, her chest heaving as if she had just sprinted a thousand miles. The cold silence of Celestia felt suffocating compared to the digital noise of the void.

She was back. She was a God again. But as she looked down at her trembling hands, the image of that smile remained burned into her mind.

She had secured the saviors she needed. But deep down, Asmoday felt a sinking dread. She hadn't just made a deal with an external variable.

She had invited a monster to the game table.

Chapter 3: The Fall (2.1)

Location:

Whispering Woods, Mondstadt

The wind had just died down. The massive blue dragon, Dvalin, had fled into the sky, leaving Aether and Paimon crouching behind a large rock.

"Paimon thinks that dragon was really mad!" the little fairy squeaked, floating up and dusting off her cape. "And that green guy... he just vanished! Filled with dandelions!".

Aether sheathed his dull blade, looking at his hand where the Anemo energy had surged just moments ago. "Yeah. That was... strange.".

"Well, at least we didn't get eaten!" Paimon crossed her arms triumphantly. "Come on, let's head to—"

CRACK.

It wasn't thunder. It sounded like the sky itself was fracturing.

Above the clearing, the blue sky tore open. Jagged, crimson pixels bled into reality, forming a square hole in the atmosphere. There was a deafening *zip*—the sound of a corrupted file closing—and four figures were ejected from the void.

They didn't float down. They fell.

"Whoa!" Paimon shrieked, darting behind Aether.

Three of the figures plummeted straight down, vanishing with a loud *WHOOSH* into a massive, leafy thicket of bushes. The dense foliage cushioned their fall, swallowing them in an explosion of green leaves and broken twigs.

But the fourth figure—a blonde boy in a long coat—wasn't so lucky.

He drifted wide, missing the soft bushes entirely.

"Gah?! W-Wait! My landing—!"

THWACK.

Tsukasa Tenma slammed directly into the low-hanging branch of a Sunsettia tree. He spun once around the limb like a gymnast gone wrong, his coat tangling in the wood, before gravity claimed him.

SNAP.

"Ooooof!"

He hit the ground face-first, a single Sunsettia fruit dropping a second later to bounce off the back of his head.

Perspective Shift:

The Outlanders

Haruka Kiritani groaned, pushing a large fern out of her face.

The landing hadn't been graceful, but it was soft. The thick bush had absorbed the impact, leaving her more disoriented than injured. Her idol instincts kicked in—she rolled onto her knees, brushing leaves off her uniform.

She sat up, her blue eyes immediately scanning the perimeter.

'Trees. Sunlight. Dirt.'

Haruka's heart hammered against her ribs. She checked her surroundings. No stage lights. No familiar school buildings. And definitely not the high-tech streets of Shibuya.

'Minori. Airi. Shizuku.' The names flashed through her mind. She had been taken right in the middle of reviewing footage. Were they safe? Did the red light take them too?

She clenched her fist, forcing her breathing to steady. *'Panic solves nothing. I need to secure the area.'*

"Gah... my spine..."

Tsukasa Tenma scrambled to his feet near the tree; his blonde hair filled with twigs and squashed fruit pulp. He looked frantic, his eyes wide and terrified. He spun around, nearly tripping over his own long coat.

"Rui?! Emu?!" Tsukasa yelled, ignoring the bruise forming on his forehead. He looked at the empty air, grasping at nothing. "Nene?! Answer me!"

The comedy of his landing evaporated instantly. He didn't care about the pain in his legs. His mind was replaying the last image he saw—the red cube slamming into his friends.

"Did they get away?" Tsukasa grabbed his own head, hyperventilating. "If that thing hurt them... if I dragged them into this..."

Then, another thought hit him like a physical blow.

"Saki..." Tsukasa went pale. "I was supposed to be home for dinner. If I'm gone... if Saki worries... if she gets sick again..."

"Tsukasa-senpai...?"

Ichika Hoshino crawled out of the bushes a few feet away, picking leaves out of her hair. She looked completely dazed. She held her chest, looking around the forest with trembling eyes.

"Where...?" Ichika whispered. "I was just... I was just about to send the song."

She looked down at her hands. They were shaking. "Mom... she was in the next room. If she hears a noise... if she comes in and I'm gone..."

Ichika looked up at Tsukasa, her voice thick with unshed tears. "Where are Honami and the others? Are they...?"

"I don't know," Haruka stated, her voice sharp enough to cut through the rising panic.

She stood up, dusting the dirt off her uniform. She was terrified, but she stood tall. Someone had to. She gestured to the vast, wild forest around them—the towering cliffs, the strange fruit trees, the lack of any city noise.

"But look at the vegetation. The air quality," Haruka analyzed, her eyes narrowing. "This isn't a movie set. And we definitely aren't in Shibuya anymore."

"No... no, no, no..."

The faint, frantic whispering came from the darkest part of the bush.

Mafuyu Asahina was still curled up inside the foliage, her knees pulled up to her chest. She wasn't looking at the others. She was staring at her phone, frantically mashing the power button.

"It won't turn on," Mafuyu whispered, her pupils dilated. "The screen is black."

She looked up, not at Haruka, but past her—at the foreign sun in the sky. It was afternoon.

"I finished my studies," Mafuyu muttered, her voice speeding up, cracking. "I had free time. But if I'm not there when Mother checks... if I'm late..."

The "good girl" mask shattered.

"She'll be angry," Mafuyu gasped, clawing at her arms. "She'll ask where I went. I can't explain this. I can't... I need to go back. *Right now*."

She tried to stand, but her legs gave out, and she collapsed back onto the dirt, sobbing dry, terrified tears.

"Mafuyu-san!" Ichika rushed to her side, hovering her hands uncertainly, unsure how to comfort someone who looked like they were shattering.

Haruka bit her lip. This was bad. They were falling apart.

"Hey! Who are you guys?"

A high-pitched voice interrupted their spiral.

The four of them froze. Slowly, they turned toward the source of the sound.

Emerging from behind a large rock was a blonde boy with a long braid, wearing strange, exotic armor. Floating next to him was a small, white-haired creature—a child?—hovering in the air like a balloon.

"Paimon asked you a question!" the floating child said, pointing a tiny finger at Tsukasa, who was still wearing a Sunsettia pulp on his coat. "Why did you guys fall out of the sky like that?!"

Paimon looked ready to demand answers, but Aether raised a hand, stopping her mid-air.

"Paimon, wait," Aether said softly.

He didn't reach for his sword. Instead, his golden eyes widened with recognition—and sympathy. He had seen the portal that dumped them here. He had seen the jagged, crimson cubes.

'That red light...' Aether thought, a pang of grief hitting his chest. *'It's the same power that took Lumine.'*

He looked at the group before him—the blonde boy hyperventilating, the girl sobbing on the ground, and the other two looking completely lost. They weren't enemies. They were victims. Just like him.

Aether stepped forward, his posture open and non-threatening. He ignored their strange clothes and lack of Visions.

"You're safe now," Aether said, his voice gentle. He looked directly at Haruka, recognizing her as the one trying to hold it together. "That red god... did she take you from your home too?"

Chapter 4: The Wind's Blessing (2.2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location:
Whispering Woods

"You're safe now," Aether said, his voice gentle. He looked directly at Haruka, recognizing her as the one trying to hold it together. "That red god... did she take you from your home too?"

The question hit the group like a physical weight.

"Red... god?" Haruka repeated, testing the words. She looked at Aether, really looking at him this time. "You mean the cube?"

Aether nodded grimly. "We call her the Unknown God. We don't know why but, she took my sister... and my powers."

Flashback.

The words triggered a violent memory in all four of them.

Tsukasa saw the crimson pixels eating his hands, and the terrifying moment the cube slammed Emu and Rui backward... Ichika saw the 'Untitled' track glitching, the red light turning her safe haven into a prison... Haruka felt the cold, unyielding mass of the cube clamping around her wrist as she clawed at the table... Mafuyu felt the burning beam hitting her chest in the silence of her room.

It wasn't a glitch. It wasn't a stage effect. It was a person. A God.

"Yeah! Aether told Paimon she was super scary!" Paimon piped up, floating closer and waving her tiny hands frantically to reenact the story she had been told. "He said she blocked their path and—*whoosh*! Cubes everywhere! It sounds terrifying, like being squished into a tiny box!"

Despite the terror, Paimon's dramatic retelling snapped them out of the trance.

"So you are stranded too," Haruka concluded, letting out a breath she didn't know she was holding. She looked at the blonde traveler. His eyes held the same loss she felt gnawing at her insides. "At least we aren't the only ones."

"Hey! Less moping, more eating!" Paimon zipped over to the Sunsettia tree where Tsukasa had made his catastrophic landing. She hovered near the ground, picking up the orange fruit that had bounced off Tsukasa's head. "You guys look like you're gonna faint. And you!" She pointed a tiny finger at Tsukasa. "You knocked down the snacks, so you get first dibs!"

Paimon tossed the fruit to him. Tsukasa fumbled, barely catching it against his chest.

"Snacks?" Tsukasa stared at the fruit like it was an alien object, then looked up at Paimon with incredulity. "This is no time for a meal break! I must find a way back immediately! My burning spirit is fuel enough to—"

"Eat it, Tsukasa-senpai," Ichika said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Your hands are shaking."

Tsukasa paused. He looked down. Ichika was right—his hands were trembling so violently he could barely hold the Sunsettia. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving him hollowed out.

He swallowed his protest. He took a bite. It was sour, sweet, and incredibly juicy. The sugar hit his system instantly.

"It is... acceptable," Tsukasa declared quietly, taking a bigger bite. He grabbed another one from the grass and handed it to Mafuyu. "Here. You need energy if we are to find a way back."

Mafuyu stared at the fruit. She didn't want to eat. She wanted to go home. But the logical part of her brain—the part that aced every exam—told her that passing out from hypoglycemia would make her late. She took a small, mechanical bite.

"Okay," Aether said, seeing some color return to their faces. "We need to get you to safety. The city of Mondstadt is nearby. But first..."

He pointed back the way he came, toward the shimmering lake.

"We should go to the Statue of the Seven. It's on the way."

Location:
Starfell Lake - Statue of the Seven

The walk was short but silent. When the group emerged from the treeline, the sight of the Statue took their breath away. It stood on a small island in the middle of the lake—a towering stone figure holding an orb, glowing with a soft, turquoise light.

"That is... an Archon?" Ichika asked, awestruck.

"The Anemo Archon, Barbatos," Paimon explained proudly, puffing out her chest. "He protects this land with the wind! And he's totally famous!"

Aether looked at the group. He remembered how the statue had responded to him earlier—granting him elemental power without a Vision.

"Try touching it," Aether suggested.

"Huh?" Tsukasa blinked. "Why?"

"I don't have a Vision—a magical focus," Aether explained, pointing to his chest. "But when I touched it, the wind answered me. If you guys are 'Outlanders' targeted by the Gods too... maybe the wind will answer you."

Haruka stepped forward first. She waded through the shallow water, looking up at the stone face, then reached out her hand.

Touch.

The moment her fingertips grazed the cold stone, a gust of wind erupted from the base of the statue. It wasn't violent; it was melodic. A turquoise crest—the symbol of Anemo—flared to life above Haruka's head before dissolving into her chest.

"Whoa!" Paimon gasped, covering her mouth. "It worked! Again!"

"I can feel it," Haruka whispered, looking at her hands. A faint breeze swirled around her fingers, light and sharp. "It feels like... rhythm."

"Me next!" Tsukasa, never one to be outstaged, marched up and slapped his hand on the pedestal. "Oh, Great Stone Statue! Grant me the power to save my sister!"

WHOOSH.

A much louder, more dramatic gust of wind blasted Tsukasa's coat upward. He laughed triumphantly as the green energy surged into him. "Hahaha! See? Even the wind recognizes a Star!"

"Paimon thinks the wind is just trying to blow his hair out of his face," the fairy deadpanned to Aether.

Ichika went next, timidly touching the stone. A soft, gentle breeze wrapped around her, sounding like a hummed tune.

Finally, Mafuyu.

She didn't want power. She wanted a way home. But Aether nudged her forward gently.

"It might help," he said.

Mafuyu reached out. When she touched the statue, the reaction was different. The wind didn't swirl around her; it seemed to rush *into* her. The hollowness in her chest—the empty space she usually filled with expectations—was suddenly flooded with a cold, rushing current.

For the first time since she arrived, the suffocating anxiety in her lungs eased. She took a deep breath.

"It's... cold," Mafuyu whispered, but she didn't pull away.

"You guys really are like Aether!" Paimon cheered, doing a loop-de-loop. "Anemo powers for everyone! Now we can definitely fight off any slimes on the way to the city!"

Location:
The Gates of Mondstadt

Armed with their new (and confusing) powers, the group made good time. Aether led them out of the woods and onto the main road leading to the massive stone bridge.

When the towering walls of Mondstadt City came into view, Ichika gasped, stopping in her tracks. Windmills turned lazily in the breeze, and white stone towers reached toward the sky.

"It's..." Ichika's eyes sparkled for a brief second, overriding her fear. "It's exactly like a fantasy RPG."

Paimon tilted her head, floating closer to Ichika's face. "Ar-Pee-Gee? What's that? Is it a type of roasted fowl? Does it taste good?"

"Eh?" Ichika blinked, flustered. "N-No. It's a... game. Where you go on adventures."

"Ooh!" Paimon's eyes lit up. "Paimon likes adventures! But Paimon likes roasted fowl more."

"Stay focused," Aether warned, though he smiled slightly. "We're almost—"

SWISH.

A blur of red dropped from the sky.

A figure landed gracefully in front of them, boots clicking against the stone bridge. She stood up, brushing off her red outfit and adjusting her goggles. She held a bow, and she didn't look like she was in the mood for games.

"Halt!" the girl announced, her voice ringing with authority. "May the Anemo God protect you, strangers!"

She looked at Aether, then at the four teenagers in strange, dirty school uniforms. Her eyes narrowed.

"I am Amber, Outrider for the Knights of Favonius," she declared, keeping her hand near her quiver. "You aren't citizens of Mondstadt. Identify yourselves!"

Aether stepped forward, hands raised peaceably. "We are travelers. We just arrived in the area."

"Travelers?" Amber looked skeptical. She pulled a small notebook from her belt, flipping it open with practiced efficiency. "Article 7 of the Knight's Handbook: *'Suspicious individuals approaching the city limits must be identified and escorted.'* And you..."

She pointed at the four behind Aether. "Strange clothes. No trading goods. Visible injuries but no weapons."

Then, her gaze landed on Paimon. Her eyes narrowed further.

"And... what is *that*?" Amber pointed a gloved finger at the floating fairy. "A mascot? A toy?"

Aether looked at Paimon, then back at Amber. He kept his face perfectly straight.

"Emergency food."

"Hey!" Paimon stomped the air, her face turning red. "Paimon is NOT emergency food! That's even worse than being a mascot!"

Amber blinked, caught off guard by the banter. A small chuckle escaped her lips, breaking her stern facade. "Emergency food... I see. Well, that's one way to put it."

She sighed, lowering her bow slightly. "Okay. You guys seem harmless enough."

"We are just... lost," Haruka added, stepping forward slightly. She gave a polite, practiced bow. "We didn't mean to cause alarm."

"It's fine, it's fine," Amber waved a hand, smiling brightly. "As an Outrider, it's my job to help! I'll escort you to the City. We can get you to the Headquarters, maybe get you something to eat..."

Despite the warm smile, Haruka noticed it. Amber's hand didn't leave the vicinity of her quiver. Her stance was still braced, ready to draw her bow in a split second.

'She doesn't trust us,' Haruka analyzed, her idol instincts picking up the subtle tension. *'She's being nice, but she's watching our every move.'*

Ichika felt it too—a prickling sensation on her neck. Even Aether, for all his relaxed posture, had shifted slightly to shield the group. The welcome was warm, but the suspicion was ice cold.

"Follow me!" Amber chirped, turning around. "This way!"

They took two steps toward the gate.

Then the sky turned black.

It happened in an instant. One second, the sun was shining on the cobblestones. The next, a gale-force wind ripped through the streets, sending market stalls and crates flying.

"What is—?!" Tsukasa yelled, shielding his face as a fruit cart smashed into a wall nearby.

"Look up!" Haruka screamed.

High above the city, a massive shadow blocked out the sun. The blue dragon, Dvalin, roared —a sound that shook the very stones of the pavement. He dived, three massive tornadoes forming in his wake, tearing through the city plaza.

"The Dragon!" Paimon shrieked, grabbing onto Aether’s cape so she wouldn't blow away. "Stormterror is attacking!"

People were screaming, running for cover. The wind howled like a banshee.

"Saki..." Tsukasa’s eyes went wide. The destruction... it was real. This wasn't a stage play.

"We need to take cover!" Aether yelled over the roar of the wind, drawing his sword. "Everyone, move!"

But before they could run, the wind picked up. Mafuyu, who was the lightest of them, lost her footing.

"Ah—!"

"Mafuyu!" Ichika lunged for her, but the gale swept them both off their feet, dragging them toward the center of the plaza where the tornadoes were merging into a chaotic vortex.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on a roll making these chapters

tho i have to spew as much as possible until im busy (again)

Chapter 5: The Stormterror's Crisis (3.1)

Location: Mondstadt City Plaza

The world was a vortex of dust, shingles, and screaming wind.

"Mafuyu!" Ichika screamed, her fingers brushing the fabric of Mafuyu's sleeve for a split second before the gale ripped them apart. The wind was too strong; it wasn't natural weather. It was a cage of currents dragging them helplessly into the sky.

"Hold on!" Aether shouted, his voice barely audible over the dragon's roar. He coiled his legs, preparing to launch himself into the cyclone.

"Wait!" Amber grabbed Aether's arm, struggling to stand against the wind. She looked at Tsukasa, who was staring up at the spiraling forms of the girls with pure terror. "You can't catch them without wings!"

She reached into her pouch and threw two folded mechanical devices toward them. "Wind Gliders! Use the currents to lift off!"

Tsukasa caught the device. It looked flimsy. It looked terrifying. But then he looked up. He saw Mafuyu—limp, unresponsive, tumbling like a ragdoll toward the dragon's maw.

'She's going to die. Just like that?'

"No!" Tsukasa roared. He didn't think. He didn't hesitate. He snapped the wings onto his back with surprising speed. "I am the Star! I will not let my audience die!"

"Haruka!" Aether yelled to the blue-haired girl. "Stay with Amber! Keep the people safe!"

"Understood!" Haruka shouted back, bracing herself against a stone pillar. She turned to the panicked civilians cowering nearby. "Everyone! Move to the alcoves! Cover your heads!"

Aether and Tsukasa exchanged a single nod. Then, they jumped.

The Sky Above Mondstadt

The wind caught the gliders instantly.

Aether moved with practiced grace, riding the updraft like a hawk. He locked his eyes on Ichika, who was flailing in the mid-air current. *'Just like Lumine,'* Aether thought, gritting his teeth. *'I won't lose another one.'*

He folded his wings, diving into a steep stoop. He slammed into Ichika mid-air, wrapping one arm firmly around her waist and snapping his wings open again to brake.

"Gah—!" Ichika gasped, clutching onto his scarf. She looked up, terrifyingly high above the ground, into golden eyes that were focused and calm.

"I've got you," Aether said, his voice steady against the howling wind. "Don't let go."

Ichika's heart hammered against her ribs, but for the first time since the red cube appeared, she felt safe.

Meanwhile, Tsukasa was screaming. "WOAHHHH! TOO HIGH! TOO HIGH!"

He was tumbling through the air, flailing his limbs until the glider caught a thermal. He stabilized, his stomach lurching. He looked around wildly.

"Mafuyu!"

He spotted her. She wasn't fighting the wind. She was just falling, her eyes squeezed shut, resigned to the drop.

Tsukasa gritted his teeth. He angled his glider down, pushing the Anemo power he got from the statue to its limit. "WONDERLAND... DIVE!"

He shot forward like a missile, crashing into Mafuyu and grabbing her wrist. The momentum swung them both around violently. Tsukasa groaned as his shoulder nearly popped, but he hauled her close, gripping the back of her sweater with a death grip.

"I... caught you!" Tsukasa yelled, panting heavily, his face pale. "Open your eyes! You are safe!"

Mafuyu slowly opened her eyes. She saw Tsukasa's terrified, sweaty face, grinning maniacally to hide his fear.

"Tsukasa... senpai?" she whispered.

'He came for me?' The thought felt foreign. In her house, she was expected to be perfect on her own. No one "saved" her; they only corrected her.

"Intruders..."

The deep, rumbling voice vibrated in their skulls. Dvalin, the massive blue dragon, turned his gaze toward the four gnats buzzing in his domain. He roared, unleashing a wave of energy that shook the gliders.

"Do not fear."

A new voice entered their minds—light, playful, and masculine. It wasn't the dragon.

"I will channel the Anemo power to you. Aim for the blood clots on his neck. That is the source of his pain."

"Who is that?!" Tsukasa yelled, looking around the empty sky. "Is that the stage director?!"

"It's that green guy!" Paimon’s voice echoed (though she was hiding on the ground). "The one we saw talking to the dragon earlier!"

"Tsukasa! On the right!" Aether commanded, steering Ichika to safety on a high rooftop before turning back to the fight. "Distract him!"

"Distract him? Hah! That is my specialty!" Tsukasa deposited Mafuyu next to Ichika on the roof. "Stay here! The Star is about to perform!"

Tsukasa launched himself back into the air. He didn't have a sword. He didn't have magic missiles. But he had a loud voice and a lot of wind.

He clapped his hands together, channeling the Anemo energy. "HEY! OVER HERE! YOU OVERGROWN LIZARD!"

Tsukasa blasted a shockwave of wind—not to hurt the dragon, but to slap it right in the nose. Dvalin roared in annoyance, snapping his jaws at the annoying blonde boy.

"Now, Aether!"

Aether seized the opening. Channeling the mysterious voice's power, he fired rapid bolts of Anemo energy, piercing the purple crystals on Dvalin’s back. The dragon shrieked, writhing in pain, before finally breaking off the attack. With one last hateful glare, Stormterror turned and fled into the clouds.

The sky cleared. The wind died.

Location: Mondstadt Plaza (Ground Level)

Aether and Tsukasa glided down to the plaza, their legs shaking as they touched the pavement.

"We... we are alive," Tsukasa panted, wiping sweat from his forehead. He struck a pose, though his knees were knocking together. "A flawless performance!"

Haruka and Amber ran over from the side streets. Haruka looked exhausted; she had spent the battle pulling civilians out of the debris path.

"Are you hurt?" Haruka asked immediately, checking Tsukasa and the girls (who Amber had helped down from the roof).

"I'm fine," Ichika said, though she was still clutching Aether’s sleeve slightly. She realized it and quickly let go, blushing. "Thank you... Aether-san."

"You guys were amazing!" Amber cheered, slapping Tsukasa on the back (which nearly knocked him over). "I've never seen anyone use a glider like that on their first try!"

"Yes, well," Tsukasa laughed nervously. "I am a natural at everything I do!"

Mafuyu stood silently at the back of the group. She stared at her hand—the one Tsukasa had grabbed. It was still warm.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound of slow, sarcastic applause echoed from the entrance of the Knights of Favonius Headquarters.

"You've actually got the power to go up against the dragon..."

A tall man with navy blue hair, an eyepatch, and a confident smirk strolled toward them. He looked at Aether, then at the ragtag group of students in dirty uniforms.

"Are you a new ally... or a new storm?" Kaeya Alberich asked, his single visible eye glinting with calculation.

Chapter 6: Chapter 4: The Knights of Favonius

Location:
Mondstadt City Plaza

"Are you a new ally... or a new storm?"

Kaeya's question lingered in the air, sharp and calculating. He stopped in front of the group, his single eye scanning them with a mix of amusement and suspicion. He looked at Aether, then turned his gaze to the four students who were still catching their breath.

"Strange attire," Kaeya noted, tapping his chin. "Not Fontainian. Definitely not from Liyue. And yet..."

He looked at Tsukasa. "I heard the Outrider call you 'Tenma'. And you..." He looked at Ichika. "Hoshino. Kiritani. Asahina."

Kaeya smirked, crossing his arms. "Those are Inazuman names. It is quite rare to see citizens escaping the Electro Archon's lockdown these days. Did you smuggle yourselves out on a Beidou cruise?"

"Ina-zuma?" Tsukasa blinked, confused. "I do not know this place! We are from—"

"Far away," Haruka interjected quickly, stepping in front of Tsukasa before he could mention Japan or Shibuya. She sensed that this man was sharper than Amber. "We are travelers. We... drifted here."

"Drifted. I see." Kaeya didn't look like he bought it for a second, but he let the smile remain. "Well, regardless of your origin, you defended our city. The Acting Grand Master will want to thank you personally."

He gestured toward the massive building behind him, the crest of the Knights visible above the heavy oak doors. "Shall we? It's not every day we get to host dragon-slayers."

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Grand Master's Office

The interior of the headquarters was grand, filled with polished wood, stone pillars, and the smell of old books. As the group entered the main office, they saw two women waiting for them.

One was sitting behind a large desk, looking exhausted but dignified. She had blonde hair tied back in a ponytail and wore a blue coat—**Jean**, the Acting Grand Master.

The other was leaning against a bookshelf, wearing a purple witch's hat and holding a book. She looked up with lazy, cat-like interest—**Lisa**, the Librarian.

"Acting Grand Master!" Amber saluted sharply. "I have brought the travelers who assisted during the attack."

Jean stood up, her expression softening as she looked at the ragtag group.

"Welcome to Mondstadt," Jean said, her voice commanding yet warm. "I am Jean, Acting Grand Master of the Knights of Favonius. I saw the battle from the balcony."

She walked around the desk, stopping in front of Aether.

"Traveler," she nodded to him. "Your combat skills turned the tide. Mondstadt is in your debt."

Then, she turned to the four students. Her gaze lingered on their injuries and dirt-stained clothes.

"And you four," Jean continued. "You are clearly not soldiers. You have no Visions. And yet, you acted."

She looked at Tsukasa. "You drew the dragon’s fire. That was reckless, but it bought us crucial time."

"It was a calculated risk!" Tsukasa declared, puffing out his chest (though he winced when he inhaled too deeply). "A Star must always seize the spotlight, even if the co-star is a dragon!"

Jean cracked a small, weary smile. Then she looked at Haruka.

"And you," Jean said softly. "While the battle raged, you remained on the ground with Outrider Amber. My guards told me you organized the evacuation of the lower plaza. You saved many lives today."

Haruka bowed politely. "I just... guided them to safety. It’s what anyone would do."

"Humility is a virtue," Lisa purred from the corner, closing her book. She walked over, her green eyes scanning the boys up and down. "Oh my. Such cute little cuties we have today. And from Inazuma, by the sound of it?"

"We are—" Ichika started, but stopped when she saw Mafuyu.

Mafuyu was standing by the door, trying to make herself as small as possible. She wasn't listening to the praise. She was trembling. The sight of Jean—an authority figure, radiating expectations and rules—was making her stomach turn. It felt too much like home. It felt like being called into a teacher's office, or worse, her mother's study.

Jean noticed the tension. She cleared her throat, shifting back to business.

"Regardless of where you come from, we have a crisis," Jean said, her face turning serious. "Stormterror... Dvalin... has been attacking the city. His power is surging because of the three elemental temples surrounding Mondstadt. We need to clear them to cut off his power source."

She looked at the map on her desk, then glanced briefly at the closed door of her office, as if checking for eavesdroppers.

"Our forces are currently... stretched thin," Jean admitted, her voice lowering slightly. "And while there are other foreign delegates in the city offering 'aid', accepting their help would come with political consequences Mondstadt cannot afford right now."

She looked back at the group with a desperate, calculating hope.

"But you... you are unaffiliated," Jean noted. "You have no political ties. If you have the power of Anemo, we could use your help without compromising our position."

"We'll help!" Paimon volunteered immediately. "If we help, do we get paid? Maybe in food?"

"Paimon..." Aether sighed.

"We will assist," Haruka said firmly. She looked at her friends. They were stranded. They needed allies. Helping the government was the best way to secure shelter and information. "We need to find a way home. Perhaps if we help you, you can help us find answers."

"It is a deal," Jean agreed. "However, since you are new to combat, we should split up to cover the temples efficiently."

Jean looked at the map on her desk, then at her officers.

"**Lisa**," Jean commanded. "You take the Traveler and the loud one... Mr. Tenma. His 'distraction' tactics might pair well with your magic."

Lisa winked at Tsukasa. "Oh, lovely. I do enjoy a spirited assistant. Don't worry, little one, big sister will keep you safe."

Tsukasa froze, his face going pale. "B-Big sister?"

"**Kaeya**," Jean continued. "You take Ms. Hoshino and Ms. Kiritani. They seem disciplined. I trust you can guide them."

Kaeya’s eye glinted. He wanted to interrogate them further, and the quiet, smart ones were usually the keys to the truth. "It would be my pleasure. I promise to be a gentleman."

"**Amber**," Jean finished. "Take Ms. Asahina. She looks... shaken. Keep her safe. Do not push her into the frontline."

Amber nodded vigorously. "Understood, Master Jean! I'll protect her!"

Jean looked at the group, her hand resting on her sword hilt.

"The Stormterror threat ends today. Knights, Outlanders... move out."

Chapter 7: The Witch and The Star (Chapter 5)

Location: Temple of the Lion

The entrance to the temple was ancient, damp, and smelled of ozone. It stood nestled in the cliffs of the Windrise area, a gaping stone maw leading into the dark.

"My, my," Lisa hummed, adjusting her hat as she looked at the heavy stone doors. "It’s been a while since I stretched my legs. I hope you boys are ready to keep up."

She turned her green eyes toward Tsukasa, who was standing stiffly next to Aether. The blonde boy was vibrating—either from adrenaline or pure terror.

"You're trembling, little star," Lisa purred, leaning closer. "Are you cold? Or perhaps... excited to go on a date with a librarian?"

"I-I am not trembling!" Tsukasa shouted, his voice cracking an octave higher than usual. He struck a pose, pointing dramatically at the door. "I am merely... vibrating with the intensity of a thousand suns! A World Future Star does not fear a dark cave!"

"He's totally scared," Paimon whispered to Aether.

Aether nodded silently, checking his sword. "Let's just get this over with."

Inside the Temple

The air inside was stale. Hilichurl camps were set up further in, blocking the path to the Wind Dragon’s power source.

"Alright," Lisa said, her tone shifting from playful to instructional. "Traveler, you know the basics. But you..." She pointed a gloved finger at Tsukasa. "Mr. Tenma. Jean said your Anemo power is raw. Show me what you can do."

"With pleasure!" Tsukasa declared.

He marched forward. A group of three Hilichurls noticed him and shrieked, charging with wooden clubs.

"Witness the power of the Phoenix Wonderland!" Tsukasa yelled. He clapped his hands together, channeling the wind. **"RISING STAR STRIKE!"**

He threw his hands out. A blast of wind erupted—but it wasn't a focused blade like Aether’s. It was a chaotic, expanding shockwave. It knocked the Hilichurls backward, sending them tumbling like bowling pins, but it also blew Paimon backward into a wall.

"Hey!" Paimon yelped. "Watch where you aim that!"

"Anemo..." Lisa observed, her eyes narrowing with intellectual curiosity. "It spreads. It’s not precise, but it covers a wide area. Useful."

She stepped forward, electricity dancing around her fingertips.

"Let big sister show you how to mix things up," she smiled.

Lisa flicked her wrist. A violet lantern of Electro energy manifested, shooting bolts of lightning that arched between the wet Hilichurls.

"Now, Little Star!" Lisa commanded. "Hit them with your wind! Spread the spark!"

Tsukasa didn't need to be told twice. "Understood! **GALE FORCE ENCORE!**"

He unleashed another blast of wind. When the Anemo hit the Electro-charged enemies, the reaction was instantaneous. *Swirl.* The purple lightning didn't just stay on one target; it exploded outward, chaining to every enemy in the room.

The Hilichurls shrieked as they were overloaded with elemental energy, vanishing into ash moments later.

"Ooh!" Paimon’s eyes sparkled. "It went *zap* and then *whoosh*!"

"Electro charged with Anemo," Lisa explained, blowing a wisp of smoke from her finger. "A classic combination. You make a surprisingly good conductor, Mr. Tenma."

"Hahaha!" Tsukasa laughed, placing his hands on his hips. "Of course! A Star shines brightest when paired with... uh..."

He looked at Lisa, who was smiling at him with that terrifyingly knowing look.

"...with a capable director!" he finished weakly.

The Inner Sanctum

They moved deeper. Between fights, the atmosphere grew quieter.

"So," Lisa broke the silence, her voice echoing in the hallway. "Inazuma, was it? Or 'far away' as your friend put it?"

Tsukasa stiffened. "I... I really do not know what this Inazuma is."

"You don't have to lie to me, cutie," Lisa teased, though her eyes were sharp. "But I am curious. You fight with such... desperation. Most people without Visions run from dragons. You jumped straight at one."

Tsukasa stopped walking. He looked down at his gloves.

"My sister," Tsukasa said quietly. The volume dropped from his voice, leaving only the raw honesty underneath. "Saki. She... she has a weak constitution. She spent most of her life in a hospital bed."

Aether looked up, surprised. This was the first time Tsukasa had spoken normally.

"I became a Star to make her smile," Tsukasa continued, clenching his fist. "To show her the wonders of the world. If I ran away... if I let fear stop me... how could I ever face her again?"

He looked up at Lisa, his eyes burning with determination.

"I don't care about dragons or gods. I just need to get back to her. So if fighting clears the path, I will fight."

Silence stretched in the hallway.

Lisa’s playful smirk faded. For a brief moment, the Librarian looked genuinely softened. She saw the resemblance now—the reckless bravery, the loyalty. It reminded her of Jean.

"My, my," Lisa sighed softly, shaking her head. "A good big brother. I have a soft spot for those."

She walked past him, patting him on the head—not teasingly, but affectionately.

"Come along then, Little Star. Let's clear this path for you."

The Wind Node

They reached the final chamber. A massive, corrupted Wind Node pulsed in the center, guarded by a Hydro Abyss Mage.

"Invaders!" the Mage squeaked, summoning a bubbling water shield. It danced around, firing bubbles that trapped Aether.

"Traveler!" Tsukasa yelled.

"Mr. Tenma!" Lisa shouted, her voice snapping like a whip. "Distraction! Now!"

"Leave it to me!"

Tsukasa didn't attack. He ran *toward* the Mage, waving his arms frantically.

"HEY! YOU FLOATING BUBBLE-BATH!" Tsukasa screamed at the top of his lungs, leaping onto a stone pillar and striking a ridiculous pose. "LOOK AT ME! I AM THE FUTURE STAR! YOUR PERFORMANCE IS LACKING!"

The Abyss Mage stopped attacking Aether, turning its mask toward the shouting idiot on the pillar. "Gah?! What is this—"

That split second of confusion was all Lisa needed.

"Blitz."

The sky turned purple. Lisa raised her hand, and a massive lightning bolt crashed through the temple ceiling (metaphorically), slamming directly into the wet Abyss Mage.

Electro-Charged.

The shield popped instantly. The Mage shrieked as it was stunned by the electricity.

"Traveler! Finish it!" Lisa commanded.

Aether broke free from the bubbles, dashed forward, and delivered a swirling Anemo slash that sent the Mage flying into the abyss below.

The Wind Node shattered. The storm outside the temple ceased immediately.

Temple Exit

They emerged back into the sunlight of Windrise. Tsukasa collapsed onto the grass, panting heavily.

"We... we did it," Tsukasa wheezed. "Another... flawless... show."

"You did well," Aether admitted, sitting down next to him. "Your voice... really carries."

"Is that a compliment?" Tsukasa asked, squinting.

"Let's say yes," Paimon giggled.

Lisa walked out last, dusting off her gloves. She looked at the exhausted boy on the grass and smiled.

"You passed, Mr. Tenma," Lisa said. "You're noisy, reckless, and entirely untrained. But..."

She leaned down, whispering into his ear so only he could hear.

"You have the heart of a Lion. Jean was right to trust you."

Tsukasa went beet red. "I—Uh—Thank you!"

"Now," Lisa straightened up, stretching her arms. "Let's head back. I'm dying for a tea break. And I'm sure Kaeya is having *much* more fun with your quiet friends."

Chapter 8: Chapter 6: The Wolf and the Idols

Location: Temple of the Wolf

The path to the temple was quiet. Too quiet.

Kaeya Alberich walked a few paces ahead, his boots crunching softly on the gravel. He didn't look back, yet Ichika felt like his single visible eye was watching their every breath.

"You two are quiet," Kaeya remarked, his voice smooth as silk. "Unlike your blonde friend. Is silence a custom where you come from?"

"We prefer to observe," Haruka replied evenly, matching his pace. She didn't flinch. "In a new environment, listening is safer than speaking."

"A wise philosophy," Kaeya chuckled. He stopped at the entrance of the Temple of the Wolf—ancient stone ruins overgrown with moss. "Most travelers are eager to share their stories. Or ask for Mora. But you... you haven't asked for anything. Not food, not shelter."

He turned, leaning against the stone archway.

"It makes one wonder," Kaeya smiled, but the air temperature seemed to drop. "Are you selfless? Or are you simply afraid of slipping up?"

Ichika gripped her skirt. *'He knows. He knows we're hiding something.'*

"We are focused on the task, Sir Kaeya," Haruka said, her blue eyes meeting his cold stare without hesitation. "Grand Master Jean asked us to clear the temple. Shall we discuss our backstory later?"

Kaeya held her gaze for a long second. Then, he laughed—a genuine, amused sound.

"Straight to business. I like that." He pushed off the wall, summoning a jagged sword made of Cryo energy in his hand. "After you, ladies."

Inside the Temple

The interior was flooded with water. Stone platforms floated on the surface, connected by narrow bridges.

"Wet environments," Kaeya noted, flicking his wrist. "Terrible for dry socks, but excellent for Cryo."

A group of Hydro Slimes bounced on the platform ahead.

"Watch closely."

Kaeya dashed forward. He didn't scream attacks like Tsukasa. He moved like a dancer—precise, lethal. He slashed through a slime, muttering a single word: **"Freeze."**

CRACK.

The slime turned into a solid block of ice instantly.

"Now," Kaeya looked back at them. "Shatter it. Show me your wind."

Haruka stepped up. She took a deep breath. She didn't have combat training, but she had spent thousands of hours perfecting choreography. She understood flow. She understood momentum.

She didn't run. She glided.

Haruka leapt over a puddle, landing lightly on the balls of her feet. She reached out, feeling that "rhythm" she sensed at the statue.

'One, two, three. Turn.'

She spun, sweeping her arm out. A blade of Anemo energy sliced through the air, perfectly timed. It hit the frozen slime.

Swirl.

The wind picked up the Cryo element, expanding the freezing mist outward. The ice didn't just break; the cold spread, freezing the water around the platform and trapping two other slimes in place.

"Impressive form," Kaeya clapped slowly. "You move like a duelist. Who taught you? The Shogun's guard?"

"My dance instructor," Haruka replied truthfully, landing back in a neutral stance.

"A dancer?" Kaeya raised an eyebrow. "Deadly grace. I suppose that makes sense."

Suddenly, a hidden Hilichurl Archer on a high ledge fired a crossbow bolt. It was aimed directly at Haruka's back.

"Haruka-chan!" Ichika screamed.

Ichika didn't think. She threw her hand forward. She didn't try to attack. She tried to *protect*.

The wind answered her desire. It didn't slash; it swirled into a tight, protective barrier around Haruka. The arrow hit the wind current and was deflected harmlessly into the water.

"Oh?" Kaeya's eye widened slightly. "A barrier variant? Rare."

Ichika panted, her hand shaking. "I... I won't let you get hurt, Haruka."

Haruka looked at Ichika, softening her guarded expression. "Thank you, Ichika."

The Interrogation

They moved deeper into the ruins. The challenges were simple, but the conversation was the real battlefield.

"You know," Kaeya said casually as they waited for a stone gate to open. "Inazuma is a locked nation. The Raiden Shogun has seized all Visions. It must have been terrifying to live there."

He watched their faces closely. He was setting a trap. If they were truly from Inazuma, they would have strong opinions on the Vision Hunt Decree.

"I... I don't know who that is," Ichika admitted, her voice small.

Kaeya paused. "You don't know the Raiden Shogun? The God of your own land?"

"We told you," Haruka interjected, stepping between Kaeya and Ichika. "We drifted here. We are not from Inazuma. We don't know your Gods."

"Not from Inazuma... and yet you bear its names," Kaeya murmured, pacing around them. "And you have no respect for the Archons. You walk into a temple and wield elements without prayer."

He stopped, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Are you from the Abyss?"

The temperature in the room plummeted. Ice crystals formed on the walls. Kaeya’s hand hovered near his sword. It wasn't a joke anymore. To a Knight of Favonius, specifically one with Kaeya's heritage, unknown agents using magic without Visions were dangerous.

Haruka felt the threat. She realized that one wrong word would turn this "cooperation" into an execution.

"We are not from the Abyss," Haruka stated, her voice iron-hard. "We are lost. We were taken from our homes by a red cube. We just want to go back."

She looked Kaeya dead in the eye.

"You look at us with suspicion. That is your job. But look at Ichika. Look at how she shakes. Does she look like an assassin to you? Or does she look like a scared child who just wants to see her mother?"

Kaeya stared at Haruka. He looked at Ichika, who was indeed trembling, clutching her uniform sleeve.

He saw the fear. It was raw. It was genuine. It reminded him of a rainy night, years ago, when he and Diluc were just boys.

The ice on the walls melted.

Kaeya sighed, the tension draining from his shoulders. He flashed his charming smile again, though it felt a little more real this time.

"You have a sharp tongue, Miss Kiritani," Kaeya chuckled. "Very well. I believe you. For now."

The Final Trial

The final chamber housed a massive Hydro Abyss Mage and a retinue of Hilichurls.

"Alright," Kaeya drew his sword. "Let's finish this. I'll freeze the big one. You two... make a mess."

Kaeya dashed in. **"Cool it!"**

He unleashed a wave of frost, freezing the Abyss Mage solid before it could teleport.

"Now!"

"Ichika!" Haruka signaled.

"Yes!"

Ichika hummed a high note—a vocalization that resonated with the Anemo power. A wind current surged, lifting the smaller Hilichurls into the air.

Haruka used the opening. She sprinted forward, using Ichika’s windstream to boost her jump. She soared over the frozen Mage.

"Cycle... Break!"

She swung her hand down. The Anemo blast slammed into the frozen Mage from above. The reaction—*Shatter* mixed with *Swirl*—cracked the Mage’s shield instantly. The monster shrieked as it dissolved into hydro particles.

The wind node shattered. The temple fell silent.

Outside the Temple

They walked back into the sunlight of Windrise.

"Not bad," Kaeya admitted, spinning a coin in his fingers. "You have terrible form, no tactical experience, and you hesitate too much."

Ichika looked down, discouraged.

"But," Kaeya continued, looking at Haruka. "You have excellent instincts. And you..." He looked at Ichika. "You have a strong desire to protect. That counts for something."

He turned to walk away, waving his hand over his shoulder.

"I'll report your success to Jean. Try not to get into trouble before we get back to the city."

As he walked away, Kaeya’s smile faded. He murmured to himself.

"Red cubes... Unknown God... and 'Drifters' who don't know the Archons."

He narrowed his eye.

"Interesting. It seems the Traveler isn't the only variable on the board."

Chapter 9: Chapter 7: The Falcon and the Puppet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Temple of the Falcon

The walk to the final temple was suffocating, mostly because Amber wouldn't stop talking.

"And that over there is Whispering Woods! Oh, wait, you guys fell there, so you already know that," Amber laughed, walking backward to face Mafuyu. "And if you look past that ridge, that's Windrise! The Great Tree is super pretty this time of day."

Mafuyu Asahina walked with her hands clasped in front of her, her posture perfect, her expression polite but hollow.

"It is very beautiful," Mafuyu responded, her voice flat. "The topography of this region is quite distinct."

Amber paused. She had met a lot of travelers, but talking to Mafuyu felt like talking to a receptionist at the Adventurers' Guild—polite, efficient, and completely walled off.

"You know," Amber said, tilting her head. "You don't have to be so... stiff. We're just clearing a temple, not taking a knight's exam."

"I am merely ensuring I do not cause trouble," Mafuyu replied automatically. "If I perform well, will Master Jean expedite our request to go home?"

Amber frowned slightly. *'Perform well? Request?'* It sounded so transactional.

"Well, yeah, Jean keeps her promises," Amber said softly. "But you look like you're marching to your doom. We're a team, remember? I've got your back!"

She patted the bow on her hip.

"I'm the Outrider Champion of Mondstadt! I won't let a single slime touch you. So... relax a little?"

Mafuyu looked at Amber's bright, earnest smile. *Relax.* That was a command she didn't know how to follow. Relaxing meant slipping up. Slipping up meant disappointment.

"I will do my best," Mafuyu said.

Amber sighed, turning back around. "Okay. Let's just... get this over with."

Inside the Temple

The Temple of the Falcon was high up, built into a cliffside. The wind here was stronger, howling through the open arches.

"Alright!" Amber drew her bow, her demeanor shifting instantly to combat readiness. "Pyro Slimes ahead. They explode if you get too close. I'll shoot them to vent their heat. You..."

She looked at Mafuyu, who was standing perfectly still, waiting.

"You have Anemo power, right? Can you push them back if they get too close?"

"Yes," Mafuyu nodded. "I will push them back. Is there a specific distance you require?"

"Uh... just far enough so they don't burn us?" Amber scratched her cheek. "Just... go with the flow!"

Amber drew back her string. The arrowhead ignited with flames. *Twang.*

The arrow hit the lead slime, causing it to darken and steam. "Now, Mafuyu!"

Mafuyu raised her hand. She didn't have a weapon. She didn't have Tsukasa's flair or Haruka's rhythm. She just felt the cold emptiness in her chest—the wind she absorbed at the statue.

‘Push them away. That is the order.’

She released the breath.

"Disappear."

A gust of wind surged forward. It wasn't violent or chaotic. It was a freezing, silent vacuum. It stripped the oxygen from the air around the slimes, snuffing out Amber’s fire instantly but also launching the slimes violently into the far wall.

SPLAT.

The slimes didn't just bounce; they were flattened by the sheer pressure of the wind.

Amber lowered her bow, blinking. "Whoa. That was... intense. Effective! But intense."

Mafuyu lowered her hand, her face impassive. "Did I make a mistake? You said to push them."

"No! No mistake!" Amber waved her hands frantically. "You did great! It's just... your wind feels kinda... lonely?"

"Lonely?" Mafuyu blinked. The concept didn't compute. Wind was just moving air.

The Crisis

They reached the central chamber. A large Mitachurl with a wooden shield roared, blocking the mechanism to the Wind Node.

"Big guy!" Amber yelled. "I'll distract him with Baron Bunny! You flank him and hit him with wind!"

Amber tossed her explosive puppet. "Go go, Baron Bunny!"

The puppet danced, drawing the Mitachurl's attention. The monster roared and smashed its shield down, crushing the toy. *BOOM.* The explosion staggered the monster, setting its wooden shield on fire.

"Now, Mafuyu! While the shield is burning! Spread the fire!"

Mafuyu stepped out from behind the pillar. She raised her hand to cast Anemo.

But the Mitachurl recovered faster than expected. It ignored the fire on its shield and charged —not at Amber, but at the movement. At Mafuyu.

Mafuyu froze.

A massive, burning wall of wood was rushing toward her.

'Move,' her brain screamed. *'Wait for instructions,'* her habit whispered.

She didn't run. She stood there, watching the death approach, paralyzed by the fear of making the *wrong* move. If she ran and ruined Amber's shot, it would be her fault. If she attacked and failed, it would be her fault.

So she did nothing.

"MAFUYU! DODGE!"

A blur of red slammed into her. Amber tackled Mafuyu to the ground just as the shield swung over their heads, the heat singing their hair.

They rolled across the stone floor. Amber sprang up instantly, firing three arrows in rapid succession into the Mitachurl's exposed face. The monster roared in pain and collapsed, dissolving into ash.

Silence fell over the chamber.

Mafuyu lay on the floor, staring up at the stone ceiling. She was alive.

"Are you crazy?!"

Mafuyu flinched. She sat up slowly. Amber was standing over her, breathing hard, her goggles askew.

"Why didn't you move?!" Amber yelled, her voice shaking. "He was going to crush you!"

Mafuyu looked down at her hands. "I... I didn't have instructions. I didn't know the correct path. If I moved, I might have interfered with your—"

"Instructions?!" Amber looked incredulous. She dropped to her knees, grabbing Mafuyu by the shoulders.

"Mafuyu, listen to me. There are no instructions for *living*! If a monster charges you, you run! If you want to fight, you fight! You don't wait for permission to survive!"

Mafuyu stared at Amber. The words bounced around her skull. *Don't wait for permission.*

"But..." Mafuyu's voice trembled. "If I do it wrong..."

"There is no 'wrong' way to save your own life!" Amber said fiercely. She pointed to the open ceiling of the temple, where the sky was visible.

"Look at that sky. Mondstadt is the City of Wind and Freedom. Here, the wind goes wherever it wants. It doesn't ask the trees for permission to blow. It doesn't ask the birds if it can lift them."

Amber squeezed Mafuyu's shoulders.

"You have that wind inside you now. So stop waiting for orders. What do *you* want to do?"

Mafuyu looked at the sky. It was blue. Limitless. Terrifyingly open. What did she want?

"I..." Mafuyu whispered. "I want... to stand up."

Amber smiled. It was the brightest thing in the temple. She let go, offering a hand.

"Then stand up."

Mafuyu took the hand. She pulled herself up. Her legs were shaking, but she was standing.

She looked at the wind swirling in her palm. It was cold. It was empty. But for the first time, it felt... hers.

Exit

They emerged from the temple. The final Wind Node was destroyed. The storm over Mondstadt had fully dissipated.

"We did it!" Amber cheered, stretching her arms. "Team Outrider is unstoppable!"

She looked at Mafuyu. "You okay?"

Mafuyu adjusted her sweater. She felt exhausted, but the suffocating pressure in her chest—the feeling of her mother's eyes on her back—had lessened by a fraction.

"I am... functional," Mafuyu said. Then, she paused. She tried to mimic what she thought a normal person would say. "Thank you. For the... save."

Amber grinned, slapping Mafuyu on the back. "Anytime! Now, let's get back to the city. I promised to treat you to a Sticky Honey Roast, and I never break a promise!"

As they walked back toward the city, Mafuyu didn't walk perfectly in step behind Amber. She walked slightly to the side, watching the grass move in the wind.

'It doesn't ask for permission,' Mafuyu thought.

She reached out her hand, letting the breeze slip through her fingers.

'I wonder what that feels like.'

Chapter End Notes

Let me know on your opinions of the story!

Chapter 10: Chapter 8: The Diplomat and the Reunion

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Hallway

The walk back from the Temple of the Lion had been surprisingly pleasant, mostly because Lisa kept complimenting Tsukasa, which fed his ego enough to ignore his aching legs.

"And that final blast," Lisa chuckled, the heels of her boots clicking on the headquarters' floor tiles. "Rough around the edges, but very spirited. You'd make a fine mage with a few decades of training."

"Decades?!" Tsukasa balked. "I am a quick learner! I shall master this 'Anemo' in a week!"

"Shh," Aether hissed, stopping abruptly in the hallway. He held out an arm to stop Tsukasa and Paimon.

They were just outside the Grand Master’s office. The door was slightly ajar, and raised voices leaked into the corridor.

"Acting Grand Master, you cannot be serious," a cold, imperious female voice sneered. "That beast is terrorizing your city. It has destroyed property, trade routes, and now threatens the safety of your citizens."

"Stormterror is one of the Four Winds of Mondstadt," Jean’s voice replied, sounding tired but firm. "We do not kill our protectors based on a temper tantrum. We will handle this internally."

"Internally?" The stranger scoffed. "Your 'internal' methods are failing. The Fatui are prepared to lend you our strength. We can crush the beast and restore order. All we ask is that you step aside."

Tsukasa frowned, whispering to Lisa. "Who is that? She sounds like the villain from *The Earl's Gray Demise*."

"The Fatui," Lisa’s smile vanished, replaced by a look of genuine distaste. "Diplomats from Snezhnaya. Wolves in sheep's clothing."

Inside the office, the argument reached its peak.

"This is not a negotiation," Jean stated, her tone leaving no room for argument. "Mondstadt is the City of Freedom. We do not trade our sovereignty for Snezhnayan protection. If you touch Dvalin, you answer to me."

There was a tense silence. Then, footsteps approached the door.

"Very well," the cold voice hissed. "But when your city falls to ruin, do not come begging to the Tsaritsa."

The door swung open. A tall woman wearing a mask over her eyes and a heavy coat strode out. She stopped when she saw the group in the hallway—Aether, Paimon, Lisa, and Tsukasa.

She sneered at them, brushing past Tsukasa with enough force to knock him off balance.

"Rude!" Paimon yelled at her retreating back.

"Hmph," the Diplomat didn't look back as she descended the stairs.

Inside the Office

Lisa pushed the door open fully. "My, my. The air in here is positively stifling."

Jean was standing by the window, rubbing her temples. She turned when she heard Lisa, her shoulders slumping slightly in relief.

"Lisa. Traveler," Jean sighed. "And Mr. Tenma. I assume the Temple of the Lion is cleared?"

"Cleared and dusted," Lisa confirmed, walking over to pour Jean a cup of water from a pitcher. "Our little star here was quite the distraction. And the storm outside has lifted."

"Excellent," Jean managed a small smile. "That buys us time. But as you heard... the pressure is mounting."

"That woman was incredibly impolite!" Tsukasa announced, crossing his arms. "If she is a diplomat, she needs acting lessons. Her villainy was too obvious!"

Jean chuckled softly, taking the cup from Lisa. "I wish it were just an act. The Fatui are... persistent."

Just then, the door opened again.

Team Kaeya entered. Kaeya looked relaxed, twirling a coin, while Haruka and Ichika looked physically drained but unharmed.

"Temple of the Wolf secured," Kaeya reported with a lazy salute. "And I'm happy to report that our guests are quite capable. Miss Kiritani has a sharp mind for tactics."

Haruka bowed slightly to Jean. "We managed to destroy the source of the wind. The area should be safe."

Ichika immediately scanned the room. "Tsukasa-senpai! You're safe."

"Of course!" Tsukasa grinned. "Wait, where are—"

"Making way! Coming through!"

Team Amber burst through the door. Amber was practically skipping, while Mafuyu walked silently behind her, clutching her sweater sleeves.

"Temple of the Falcon is clear!" Amber announced, giving a thumbs up. "We totally smashed those slimes! Mafuyu was great!"

Mafuyu flinched slightly at the name but didn't retreat into the corner this time. She stood next to Amber, looking at the floor, but she was standing.

"We are... finished," Mafuyu said quietly.

The De-Briefing

"Thank you, everyone," Jean said, looking at the assembled group. For the first time all day, she looked hopeful. "With the three temples cleared, Dvalin's power flow has been disrupted. The storm barriers around his lair should be weakening."

She turned to Aether. "Traveler, your help was invaluable."

Then, she looked at the four students. They were dirty, bruised, and clearly not from this world. They were civilians who had stepped up when her own knights were stretched thin.

"And to you four," Jean said formally, placing a hand over her heart. "On behalf of the Knights of Favonius, I thank you. You defended a city that is not your own. You have proven your honor."

"We just wanted to survive," Haruka said honestly. "But... we are glad we could help."

"Now," Jean exhaled, sitting down on the edge of her desk. "We have the Dragon crisis to solve, but first... you look exhausted."

"We are!" Paimon floated onto the desk. "Paimon is starving! And they," she pointed at the Sekai group, "look like they're gonna pass out!"

Amber stepped forward, putting an arm around Mafuyu's shoulder (who stiffened, but didn't pull away).

"Master Jean, they need to wind down," Amber insisted. "They've been through a lot today. Falling from the sky, fighting dragons, clearing temples... that's too much for one day! I promised to take them for Sticky Honey Roast!"

"Amber is right," Kaeya added smoothly. "We can discuss the Fatui and the Dragon tomorrow. Tonight, our guests need rest."

Jean nodded. "Agreed. I will arrange quarters for you at the Goth Grand Hotel—provided the Fatui haven't booked the entire establishment yet. If not, the barracks are available."

"Hotel sounds better," Tsukasa muttered.

"We will figure out a way to get you home," Jean promised, looking directly at Mafuyu and Ichika. "But for tonight... please, rest. You are safe here."

Ichika looked at her friends. Tsukasa was trying to look energetic but his legs were shaking. Haruka was leaning against the wall for support. Mafuyu looked hollow, but she was listening.

"Thank you, Grand Master," Ichika said.

"Alright!" Amber clapped her hands. "To the Good Hunter! Food is on me!"

As the group filed out of the office, eager for food and sleep, Aether lingered for a second, looking at Jean.

'The Fatui... and the Abyss,' Aether thought. *'This world is just as messy as the last one.'*

He turned and followed the strange, uniform-wearing teenagers out the door. They were variables in this loop, just like him. And he had a feeling they were going to need each other.

Chapter 11: Chapter 9: Under the Foreign Moon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: The Good Hunter, Mondstadt City

The smell of roasting meat and caramelized sugar wafted through the evening air of Mondstadt. For four teenagers who had spent the last few hours fighting dragons and exploring ancient ruins, it was the best smell in the world.

"Order up!" Sara, the waitress, placed a massive platter on the outdoor table. "Five servings of Sticky Honey Roast, plus Fisherman’s Toast and Mushroom Skewers!"

"Food!" Paimon cheered, vibrating in the air. "Paimon thought she was gonna waste away!"

"It looks... incredibly caloric," Haruka noted, eyeing the glistening glaze on the steak. But her stomach let out a traitorous growl. She sighed, picking up a fork. "But I suppose we burned enough energy to justify it."

Amber grinned, raising a glass of apple cider. "Dig in, guys! You earned it!"

Tsukasa didn't need telling twice. He sliced a piece of the roast and took a bite. His eyes widened.

"Delicious!" Tsukasa announced, standing up (and startling a passing cat). "This flavor... it is robust! Sweet yet savory! It rivals the catering at the Phoenix Wonderland!"

"Sit down, Senpai," Ichika pulled him back down by his coat, her face flushed with embarrassment. "People are staring."

"Let them stare!" Tsukasa declared, though he sat back down. "A Star must appreciate the local cuisine with gusto!"

As they ate, the adrenaline of the battle began to fade, replaced by the heavy reality of their situation.

"So," Aether said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. He looked at the group. "Kaeya mentioned you guys drift? From a place called 'Inazuma'?"

"No," Haruka shook her head, placing her fork down. "We aren't from Inazuma. We're from Japan. A city called Tokyo."

Amber and Paimon exchanged confused looks.

"Japan?" Amber tilted her head. "Is that near Fontaine? Or maybe across the Mare Jivari?"

"I don't think it's in this world at all," Aether said quietly.

The table went silent.

Ichika gripped her glass. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a traveler from another world," Aether admitted, pointing to the sky. "I travel between stars. Teyvat... this world... it's just one of many."

He gestured to the city around them—the windmills, the lack of electricity, the knights in armor.

"If you've never heard of the Seven Archons, or Visions, or the Fatui... then you're probably like me. You're Outlanders."

Mafuyu stopped eating. She looked at the sky. It was dark now, and the stars were out. But the constellations were wrong.

"So..." Mafuyu's voice was barely a whisper. "We really are... gone."

"We can't go home?" Ichika asked, her voice trembling. "But... my band. We have practice tomorrow."

"My show," Tsukasa muttered, the light fading from his eyes. "Saki... she'll be waiting."

The mood plummeted. The realization that this wasn't just a "weird dream" but a displacement across realities hit them harder than the dragon did.

Amber bit her lip. She hated seeing people look so hopeless.

"Hey!" Amber slammed her hand on the table, making the silverware jump. "Don't give up yet! Mondstadt is the City of Freedom, right? And Aether is looking for his sister, too! If anyone can find a way to cross worlds, it's the Knights... or maybe the Alchemists! Albedo is super smart!"

She paused, tapping her chin, trying to scrape up more hope.

"Or... maybe even Lord Barbatos himself! He is the God of Freedom, after all! He'd surely help outlaws like you!"

She faltered slightly, scratching the back of her head with a nervous laugh.

"Though... well, he hasn't actually been seen in a few centuries. He kinda just... disappeared like the wind after the war. Classic Barbatos, right? Haha..."

Tsukasa looked at Amber's burning determination (and her awkward attempt to cover for her missing God). He looked at Aether, who gave him a solid, understanding nod.

Tsukasa slapped his cheeks with both hands. *Smack.*

"She is right!" Tsukasa shouted (a little too loud). "We are the Tsukasa Tenma Heavy Industry... no, we are the Teyvat Expedition Team! We shall not be defeated by a mere

dimensional displacement!"

He grabbed a mushroom skewer and pointed it at the sky.

"Just you wait, Saki! Your big brother will return with stories of dragons and knights!"

Ichika smiled weakly. "Tsukasa-senpai really never changes."

"It's reassuring, in a way," Haruka admitted, taking a sip of her cider.

Location: Goth Grand Hotel

After dinner, Jean made good on her promise. The Goth Grand Hotel was lavish, though currently occupied mostly by Fatui diplomats who glared at them in the lobby.

They were given two rooms on the top floor.

Room 1: The Girls (Ichika, Haruka, Mafuyu, Paimon)

The room was warm, lit by candles and a fireplace. Paimon had immediately claimed the softest pillow on the rug and fallen asleep, snoring softly.

Haruka sat on the edge of the bed, unlacing her boots. She looked over at Mafuyu, who was standing by the window, staring out at the darkened city.

"Mafuyu-san," Haruka said gently. "You should sleep. We don't know what tomorrow holds."

Mafuyu didn't turn around. She was holding her phone. It was a cold, black brick in her hands.

"It's quiet," Mafuyu whispered.

"Yes," Ichika said, organizing her pillows. "No cars. No trains."

"No notifications," Mafuyu added.

She ran her thumb over the screen. Usually, by this time, she would have received three texts from her mother asking about her prep school results. Or a reminder to sleep early for tomorrow's lessons.

There was nothing.

"She can't see me," Mafuyu murmured.

"What was that?" Haruka asked.

"Nothing," Mafuyu turned around. Her face was still pale, but there was a strange flicker in her dull eyes—was it fear? Or relief? "I... I will try to sleep."

She climbed into the bed, pulling the thick duvet over her head. For the first time in years, she was sleeping in a room where her door didn't have a lock, yet she felt strangely... hidden.

Room 2: The Boys (Aether, Tsukasa)

The boys' room was simpler. Aether sat on his bed, polishing his dull blade with a cloth. Tsukasa stood on the balcony, leaning against the railing, looking at the massive statue of Barbatos in the distance.

Aether put the sword down and walked out to the balcony.

"You put on a good show at dinner," Aether said, leaning on the rail next to him.

Tsukasa sighed—a long, deflating sound that seemed to let all the "Star" energy out of his body. He slumped over the railing.

"It is exhausting," Tsukasa admitted, his voice dropping to a normal, teenage register. "Acting like everything is fine."

"You're doing it for them," Aether noted. "For Ichika and the others. To keep morale up."

"They are scared," Tsukasa said, looking at his hands. "Hoshino is trembling. Asahina looks like she is about to shatter. If I panic... they will break."

He gripped the railing.

"I have a little sister," Tsukasa said suddenly. "Saki. She... she relies on me. I promised I would always be there to make her laugh. To wipe her tears."

He looked at Aether, his eyes wet.

"If I'm here... who is making her smile? Who is protecting her?"

Aether felt a pang in his chest. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, dried flower—an Inteyvat.

"I know the feeling," Aether said softly. "My sister, Lumine... we were separated by that God. I've been looking for her for months."

Tsukasa looked at Aether. He saw the weariness in the traveler's eyes, but also the steel.

"You never gave up?" Tsukasa asked.

"Never," Aether vowed. "I will tear down the sky if I have to. I will find her."

Tsukasa stared at him. Then, he stood up straight. He adjusted his coat, the "Star" returning to his eyes, but this time, it wasn't an act. It was resolve.

"Then I shall do the same!" Tsukasa declared. "We are big brothers! We cannot let the universe defeat us!"

He held out a hand.

"Traveler... Aether. Let us form a pact. I will help you find your sister."

Aether smiled, gripping Tsukasa’s hand firmly.

"And I'll help you get home to yours."

The pact was sealed under the moonlight of Teyvat. Two brothers, worlds apart, united by the same goal.

"Now!" Tsukasa yawned loudly. "I must sleep! A Star requires at least eight hours of beauty rest to shine!"

"Right," Aether chuckled, following him inside. "Goodnight, Tsukasa."

Chapter End Notes

If you are wondering why Haruka revealed the real place where they came from, i decided at this point, i think Haruka would trust the Favonius at this part, especially Amber, and no i am not shipping them, i have no plans to pair haruka yet

Current ship:

- Aether / Ichika
- Tsukasa / Mafuyu

Chapter 12: Chapter 10.1: The Librarian’s Wrath

Location: Knights of Favonius Library

The morning sun filtered through the grand windows of the library, illuminating the dust motes dancing in the air. It was a peaceful, scholarly atmosphere.

"AND SO! THE STAR DECLARES—!"

"Shh."

The sound wasn't loud, but it carried the weight of a thunderclap. Tsukasa Tenma froze mid-pose, his arm still extended toward a bookshelf. He slowly turned his head.

Lisa Minci was sitting at her desk, sipping tea. She didn't look up from her ledger. Sparks of purple electricity danced dangerously around her quill pen.

"Mr. Tenma," Lisa purred, her voice dripping with dangerous sweetness. "This is a place of quiet contemplation. If you wish to project your voice, might I suggest the training grounds? Or perhaps... the solitary confinement cells?"

"I-I apologize!" Tsukasa whispered violently, pulling his arm back. "I was simply... practicing my monologue for when we return home!"

Aether, who was browsing the 'Teyvat Travel Guide' nearby, sighed. "Tsukasa, maybe sit down before she actually zaps you."

"A wise suggestion," Lisa closed the ledger with a heavy *thud*. She stood up, stretching her arms. "Although, since you two occupy so much space, perhaps you can make yourselves useful. I have a... situation."

"A situation?" Paimon floated over. "Is it another dragon?"

"Worse," Lisa’s eyes narrowed. "An overdue book."

Tsukasa blinked. "A book? Is that all?"

The temperature in the library dropped ten degrees. The sky outside seemed to darken momentarily.

"It is *The Boar Princess*, Volume 7," Lisa recited, electricity crackling visibly in her hair. "It was due three days ago. The borrower, an adventurer named Dongdong, claims he lost it near the Whispering Woods. He said a 'fuzzy thief' took it."

She turned her gaze to the boys.

"I am going to retrieve it. You are coming with me. We wouldn't want the thief to get... lonely, would we?"

Tsukasa gulped. "Y-Yes, Ma'am! Big Sister! Miss Lisa!"

Location: Whispering Woods

The trio (plus Paimon) trekked into the woods. Lisa moved with leisurely grace, while Tsukasa marched stiffly, trying to act like a bodyguard to avoid being electrocuted.

"So," Lisa asked, glancing at Aether. "Have our guests settled in? I heard the Grand Master arranged rooms at the Goth."

"Yeah," Aether nodded, using his Elemental Sight to scan for tracks. "They're still shaken up. But they're tough."

"Especially the little star here," Lisa teased, poking Tsukasa's cheek. "Loud, but resilient. I like that."

"I am a detective!" Tsukasa declared suddenly, crouching down to inspect a broken twig. "Look here! Footprints! Small... chaotic... definitely the work of a villain!"

"Those are squirrel tracks, Tsukasa," Aether deadpanned.

"A villainous squirrel!" Tsukasa corrected without missing a beat.

"Over here, cuties," Lisa called out from a clearing ahead. She was pointing her catalyst at a purple elemental trail. "Elemental traces. It seems our thief isn't a squirrel. It's an Abyss Mage."

The Confrontation

They tracked the trail to a small cave near the edge of Starfell Lake. Inside, a Hydro Abyss Mage was floating over a campfire, cackling as he held a book.

"Yes! With the ancient knowledge in this tome... the Abyss Order shall—wait, why is it just pictures of boars?" the Mage muttered, flipping the pages confusedly.

"Ahem."

The Mage froze. He floated around slowly.

Standing at the cave entrance was Lisa. She wasn't smiling. Violet lightning arched from her shoulders, illuminating the dark cave with a terrifying stroboscopic effect.

"That book," Lisa said, her voice dropping to a whisper that echoed louder than a scream. "Does not belong to you."

The Abyss Mage shrieked. "The Witch of the Purple Rose! Attack!"

He summoned a hydro shield and waved his staff. Three Hilichurls charged from the shadows.

"Tsukasa! Aether! You handle the riff-raff," Lisa commanded, stepping forward. "The Mage is *mine*."

"Understood!" Tsukasa yelled, happy to be anywhere that wasn't near Lisa right now.

He charged the Hilichurls. "STARLIGHT KICK!" (It was a regular kick, but with wind).

He knocked a Hilichurl shield aside, allowing Aether to sweep in with a sword combo. They worked well together—Tsukasa using wide Anemo blasts to control the crowd, while Aether delivered precision strikes.

Behind them, the cave filled with the sound of pure destruction.

ZAP. CRACK. BOOM.

"GAAAAHHH!" The Abyss Mage screamed as his shield evaporated instantly under a bombardment of lightning.

"You stole... a library book..." Lisa chanted, each word punctuated by a lightning bolt. "And you... dog-eared... the pages!"

KA-BOOM.

When Tsukasa and Aether finished with the Hilichurls, they turned around. The Abyss Mage was a pile of ash. The book, miraculously unharmed, was floating in a sphere of electricity back to Lisa’s hand.

"There," Lisa sighed happily, dusting off her dress. "All retrieved. Good work, boys."

Tsukasa was hugging Paimon in terror. "Remind me never to return a book late."

"Paimon thinks returning it on time isn't enough," Paimon whispered back. "We should wrap it in gift wrap just to be safe."

The Aftermath

They walked out of the cave, back into the sunlight of Starfell Lake. It was a beautiful afternoon. The water shimmered, and the statue of the Seven glowed in the distance.

"Well, that was a productive outing," Lisa hummed, holding the book close. "Maybe I'll treat you boys to tea back at the headquarters."

"That sounds delightful!" Tsukasa said, his energy returning now that the combat was over. "I—"

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The ground shook.

A massive plume of water erupted from the *other* side of Starfell Lake, towering higher than the trees. It was followed by a shockwave of heat and smoke that ruffled their clothes even from this distance. Birds scattered from the trees in a panic.

"WHOA!" Paimon grabbed Aether's hair. "What was that?! Did a volcano go off?!"

Tsukasa struck a defensive pose. "An explosion? Is it the Dragon again?! Or the Fatui?!"

Aether drew his sword, scanning the horizon. "That came from the supply route area. We should check it out!"

They looked at Lisa, expecting the Grand Mage to be springing into action.

Instead, Lisa glanced at the mushroom cloud, sighed, and shook her head.

"Oh dear," she said, sounding remarkably unbothered. "It seems a certain spark knight is having a playdate."

"Playdate?!" Tsukasa yelled, pointing at the smoke column. "That looks like a war zone!"

"Don't worry," Lisa waved a hand dismissively, turning back toward the city. "Amber is over there with your friend Mafuyu. I'm sure she has it handled. Besides..."

She yawned, covering her mouth delicately.

"It's tea time. And I strictly do not work during tea time. Are you coming?"

Aether and Tsukasa exchanged a look. The explosion was massive. But if Lisa said it was fine...

"I... suppose we follow the scary lady," Tsukasa whispered.

"Agreed," Aether whispered back.

As they followed Lisa back to Mondstadt, Aether glanced back one last time at the smoke rising over the lake.

'Amber and Mafuyu are over there,' Aether thought. *'I hope they survived whatever that was.'*

Chapter 13: Chapter 10.2: The Spark and the Silence

Location: Goth Grand Hotel - Hallway

The morning sun hadn't quite breached the heavy curtains of the hotel room, but Mafuyu Asahina was already dressed. She sat on the edge of her bed, smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt for the tenth time.

Haruka and Ichika were still asleep. Paimon was snoring loudly in the corner.

Mafuyu stared at the door. Waiting. In her house, the morning routine was strict. If she wasn't ready by 6:00 AM, she was late. Here, there was no schedule, which paradoxically made her more anxious. *What am I supposed to do?*

Knock. Knock. Knock.

The sound was sharp and rhythmic. Mafuyu stood up instantly, opening the door before the knocker could finish.

Standing in the hallway was Amber, looking bright-eyed and energetic despite the early hour.

"Oh! Good morning, Mafuyu!" Amber blinked, surprised to see her up so early. "Wow, you're an early bird, huh? I was worried I'd wake everyone up."

"I have been awake," Mafuyu replied quietly, stepping into the hall and closing the door softly behind her so as not to disturb the others. "Do you require something?"

"Actually, yes!" Amber adjusted her gloves. "Master Jean has a special request. Most of the Knights are busy cleaning up the debris from yesterday's storm, but we have a... small situation near Starfell Lake."

Amber scratched her cheek nervously.

"Jean specifically asked if you could tag along. She thinks your... uh... *calm demeanor* might be helpful for this specific mission."

"A mission," Mafuyu repeated. Her posture straightened. This was familiar territory. An order. A task to prove her worth. "I understand. I am ready to depart immediately."

Amber laughed, waving her hands. "It's not a combat raid! It's more of a... retrieval mission. Come on, I'll explain on the way!"

Location: En Route to Starfell Lake

"So," Amber said, adjusting her goggles as they trekked through the Whispering Woods. "Just a heads up. The Knight we're going to retrieve is... special."

Mafuyu walked beside her, hands clasped. "Special? Is he a high-ranking officer?"

"She," Amber corrected with a nervous laugh. "And technically, yes. She’s the Spark Knight. But... well, she’s a child. And she likes explosions. A lot."

Mafuyu stopped walking. She blinked.

"A child?" Mafuyu repeated. "The Knights of Favonius employ child soldiers?"

"No! No, not like that!" Amber waved her hands frantically. "She’s just... really strong. And if we don't watch her, she accidentally terraforms the landscape. Master Jean usually keeps her grounded, but she snuck out this morning to 'go fishing'."

Mafuyu processed this. A child who "terraforms landscapes" and sneaks out. In Mafuyu’s world, a child sneaking out would result in a lecture about responsibility and future prospects. Here, it resulted in an official Knight escort.

"I see," Mafuyu said, though she didn't.

Location: Starfell Lake (The Other Side)

They found her quickly. It wasn't hard. They just followed the sound of *kaboom*.

Standing at the edge of the lake was a small girl in red, wearing a massive backpack and a clover-marked hat. She was humming a cheerful tune while tossing small, round objects into the water.

Splash. BOOM.

Dead fish floated to the surface.

"Klee!" Amber shouted, running forward.

The girl turned around, her face lighting up. "Big Sister Amber!"

Klee ran over, tackling Amber into a hug. Then, she peered around Amber’s legs to look at Mafuyu. Her big red eyes widened with curiosity.

"Ooh! Who is this? She looks... purple!" Klee pointed at Mafuyu. "Is she a new Knight? Why is her face so sad? Did she lose her Dodoco?"

Mafuyu stiffened. "I... do not have a Dodoco."

"This is Mafuyu," Amber introduced, resting a hand on Klee’s hat. "She's a guest from far away. We're here to bring you back, Klee. Master Jean is looking for you."

"Aww," Klee kicked the dirt. "But Klee isn't done! Klee saw some weird fluffy monsters hiding boxes in the cave over there! I wanted to see if they had fish inside!"

Amber froze. "Weird fluffy monsters? Hiding boxes?"

Amber looked at where Klee was pointing—a secluded inlet masked by heavy brush.

"Mafuyu, stay close to Klee," Amber ordered, her voice shifting to professional mode. "I'm going to check it out."

The Discovery

They approached the inlet carefully. Hidden behind the rocks was a makeshift camp. It wasn't just a campfire; it was a stockpile. Stacks of crates marked with the Hydro element symbol, alongside massive, unstable-looking barrels filled with elemental slime condensate and Pyro powder.

Amber’s face went pale.

"Abyss Order," Amber hissed, ducking behind a rock. She scanned the labels on the crates. "Look at that stockpile... highly volatile elemental amber, concentrated slime condensate... They aren't just looking for loot."

She looked toward the distant spires of Mondstadt.

"They're planning a major attack on the city. If this much explosive power went off inside the walls... the casualty count would be catastrophic."

"Explosives?" Klee whispered, her eyes sparkling. "Like bombs?"

"Bad bombs, Klee," Amber warned grimly. "We need to report this to—"

"Look!" Klee pointed. "A Fuzzy Ball!"

A Cryo Abyss Mage floated out of the cave, inspecting the crates. "Yes... with these slime bombs, we shall blow the Knights to smithereens! Hahaha!"

Mafuyu watched the creature. It was grotesque, but Klee didn't look scared. She looked... excited.

"He's a bad guy, right?" Klee asked, reaching into her backpack.

"Yes, but we need to wait for backup," Amber whispered. "Those barrels are unstable. If we start a fight here, the chain reaction could—"

"Don't worry, Amber!" Klee grinned, pulling out a round, fluffy bomb with rabbit ears. "Klee will help! Jumpy Dumpty, go!"

Amber’s eyes went wide. "Klee, NO!"

It happened in slow motion. Mafuyu watched as the small red bomb arced through the air. It bounced once—*boing*—on the ground.

Boing.

It landed directly on top of the stack of unstable Abyss barrels.

The Abyss Mage stared at the bomb. "Eh?"

Klee covered her ears. "Da-da-da!"

Amber didn't think. She didn't calculate. She moved.

"GET DOWN!"

Amber grabbed Mafuyu by the collar of her sweater with one hand and snatched Klee by the backpack with the other. She threw herself backward, diving behind a massive slab of rock just as the world turned white.

The Explosion

KABOOOOOOOOOOOOM.

It wasn't just a blast; it was an erasure.

The mix of Klee’s pyro and the concentrated elemental slime created an Overload reaction of catastrophic proportions. The supply cache didn't just explode; it vaporized. The shockwave shattered the trees nearby and sent a mushroom cloud rising high into the sky (visible all the way from the Library where Lisa was sipping tea).

Debris rained down like hail. The ground shook violently enough to knock fish out of the lake.

Behind the rock, Amber was huddled over the two girls, shielding them with her own body and her Baron Bunny shield. She was coughing, her red outfit covered in dust.

When the raining rocks finally stopped, silence returned to the lake.

Amber slowly lifted her head. "Is... is everyone alive?"

Klee popped up, her face covered in soot, looking incredibly pleased with herself. "Wow! That was a really big one! Did you see the fish go fly?"

Mafuyu sat up. She brushed the dirt off her skirt. Her ears were ringing. She looked at the crater where the Abyss camp used to be. There was nothing left but a smoking hole.

She looked at Klee, who was laughing. Then she looked at Amber, who looked ready to have a heart attack.

"You..." Mafuyu stared at the child. "You destroyed the target efficiently."

"I know!" Klee beamed.

"KLEE!" Amber yelled, grabbing the child’s cheeks. "You can't just throw bombs at strange barrels! We could have been blown up!"

"But... but..." Klee’s lip wobbled. "The bad guy was there... and Klee wanted to help..."

Amber sighed, the anger draining out of her instantly. She hugged the soot-stained child. "I know. I know. You saved us. But please... warn me next time?"

She looked at Mafuyu. "Are you hurt? I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for your first outing to be a demolition mission!"

Mafuyu looked at Amber. She saw the genuine concern. She saw the lack of anger toward the child who made a mistake.

In Mafuyu's house, a mistake of this magnitude would have meant silence. Cold, disappointed silence.

But here, amidst the smoke and ruin, Amber was hugging the mistake.

Mafuyu felt something twitch in the corner of her mouth. A muscle memory she hadn't used in a long time.

"I am uninjured," Mafuyu said. She looked at the smoking crater. "And... it was quite loud."

"Loud is good!" Klee cheered. "Big Sister Purple gets it!"

Amber groaned, standing up and dusting herself off. "Okay. Let's get back before Master Jean sees the smoke. Maybe if we run, we can blame it on... I don't know, a meteorite?"

"Or a dragon?" Mafuyu suggested deadpan.

Amber stared at her. Then, she burst out laughing.

"Yes! A dragon! You're catching on, Mafuyu!"

Chapter 14: Chapter 10.3: The Maid and the Weight of Stone

Location: Goth Grand Hotel

The sun was already high in the sky, streaming aggressively through the curtains, when Haruka finally opened her eyes.

She blinked at the ceiling, disoriented. Her internal clock usually woke her up at 5:30 AM sharp for vocal warm-ups. She checked the clock on the mantle.

9:15 AM.

"Nine?!" Haruka sat up, throwing the covers off. "We slept in!"

"Mn... five more minutes..." Ichika groaned from the other bed, burying her face in the pillow.

"Ichika-chan, wake up," Haruka said, though she felt the heaviness in her own limbs. The adrenaline from fighting Stormterror, clearing the Temple of the Wolf, and the sheer mental exhaustion of dimension-hopping had finally caught up to them. Their bodies had simply shut down to recover.

Haruka looked around the room. The third bed was empty. The sheets were neatly made, military style.

"Mafuyu-san is gone," Haruka noted, fully awake now. She checked the corner where Paimon had slept. Empty.

Ichika sat up, rubbing her eyes and yawning. "The boys... maybe they're awake?"

They quickly dressed in their uniforms—which Noelle had kindly washed and pressed overnight—and hurried downstairs to the lobby.

The hotel owner, Mr. Goth, was behind the counter. He looked up and smiled. "Ah, the young ladies are awake. Did you sleep well? You looked like you had fought a war when you arrived last night."

"We did, actually," Haruka muttered. "Excuse me, sir. Have you seen our companions?"

"Oh, yes," Mr. Goth nodded. "The young man with the blonde hair—Mr. Tenma—and the Traveler left about an hour ago. The Librarian, Miss Lisa, came to collect them."

He leaned in, lowering his voice conspiratorially. "She had a rather... *mischievous* smirk on her face. Said something about 'overdue books' and 'manual labor'. I almost felt sorry for the boys."

Ichika paled. "That sounds... ominous."

"And the other young lady?" Haruka asked. "The one with purple hair?"

"Miss Asahina left even earlier," Goth replied. "Outrider Amber came to fetch her. Said it was a direct order from the Acting Grand Master for a special assignment."

"So we're the only ones left behind," Ichika sighed.

"It makes sense," Haruka reasoned, leading Ichika toward the door. "We slept in because we were exhausted. They probably didn't want to wake us. Let's head to the Headquarters. If anyone knows where they are, it's Master Jean."

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Exterior

The walk to the headquarters was peaceful. The city was bustling, merchants repairing the stalls damaged by yesterday's storm.

They reached the massive stone steps of the Headquarters. The guards nodded to them respectfully, but before they could enter the main doors, a sound echoed from the area behind the building.

CRACK.

It sounded like a tree snapping in half.

THUD.

Then, the sound of heavy stone hitting dirt.

"What was that?" Ichika flinched, instinctively grabbing Haruka’s sleeve. "Another attack?"

"It came from behind," Haruka said, her eyes narrowing as she looked toward the side of the massive stone building. "Let's check before we go in."

They circled the building to the stone courtyard used for training. They expected to see a squad of knights sparring, or perhaps Kaeya running drills.

Instead, they saw a single girl.

She looked about their age, wearing a maid’s outfit plated with silver armor. She had short, silver hair and a gentle expression. She was holding a massive claymore—a sword that looked heavy enough to crush a carriage—with one hand.

In front of her was a row of heavy wooden training dummies reinforced with stone plating.

"Hah!" The maid swung the blade.

CRUNCH.

The wooden dummy didn't just break; it exploded. Splinters and stone fragments flew through the air like shrapnel.

"Oh dear," the maid sighed, lowering the massive sword as if it weighed nothing. She pulled a broom out of nowhere. "I put too much force into it again. I need to clean this up before Master Jean sees..."

"Um..." Ichika stepped forward, stepping on a twig.

The maid spun around, clutching the broom to her chest. "Oh! G-Greetings!"

She bowed deeply, flustered. "I apologize! The training area is a bit messy right now. Please, allow me a moment to tidy up!"

"It's fine," Haruka raised a hand. She looked at the destroyed dummy, then at the girl’s slender arms. "That was... incredible strength. Are you a Knight?"

"Me? Oh, no, no," the girl shook her head vigorously. "I am Noelle. A maid of the Knights of Favonius. I am simply... training. Hoping to pass the selection exam someday."

She looked at the debris, then at the sun. "Oh no, look at the time! I need to dispose of this, then finish the laundry for the barracks, then help Marjorie locate a missing shipment, and then prepare afternoon tea for Lisa..."

"That sounds like... a lot," Ichika noted, feeling a strange kinship. It reminded her of trying to balance songwriting, practice, school, and keeping her friend group together.

"It is my duty!" Noelle beamed, picking up a heavy crate of rocks.

Ichika looked at Haruka. Haruka nodded. They had nothing else to do, and they owed the Knights for the hospitality.

"Let us help you," Ichika offered, rolling up her sleeves.

"Oh! No, I couldn't possibly impose!" Noelle protested. "You are guests!"

"We're guests who slept in until nine," Haruka said with a small smile, grabbing the other side of the crate. "Consider it a workout. We need to stay in shape too."

The Montage: Several Hours Later

It started with moving rocks. Then it became hanging sheets in the courtyard. Then it became carrying crates of supplies from the lower city all the way up the stairs.

By the time the afternoon sun hit its peak, Haruka and Ichika were wiped out.

Ichika was leaning against a wall, panting. Her arms felt like jelly. Haruka was wiping sweat from her forehead, her perfect idol posture slipping just a fraction.

"Okay..." Haruka breathed out. "That's... the last shipment."

Noelle, however, looked as fresh as a rose. She wasn't sweating. She wasn't panting. She clapped her hands together brightly.

"Excellent work! Thank you so much!" Noelle chirped. "Now, I just need to scrub the library floors, polish the chandeliers, and then I can start prepping dinner for the squad!"

She picked up a bucket and mop, ready to sprint back inside.

"Wait."

Haruka reached out, grabbing Noelle's shoulder. "Noelle-san. Stop."

Noelle blinked, confused. "Is something wrong? Do you need water?"

"We need a break," Haruka said, gesturing to Ichika, who was sliding down the wall. "And *you* need a break."

"Me? I'm fine!" Noelle smiled. "I'm used to this! If I don't do it, who will? Everyone is so busy with Stormterror. I want to lighten the burden."

Haruka looked at her. She saw the delusion. It was the same delusion Haruka had lived with for years—the idea that if you just work harder, harder, harder, you can fix everything.

"You're taking on too much," Haruka said bluntly.

Noelle blinked. "Pardon?"

"Laundry. Cleaning. Training. Logistics," Haruka listed them off, her voice firm. "We helped you for four hours, and I'm exhausted. But you're planning to do *another* four hours?"

"You're trying to carry the whole organization on your back," Ichika added softly, standing up. "I know that feeling. Thinking that if you stop for one second, everything falls apart."

"But... it is my duty," Noelle said, her voice wavering slightly. "I want to be useful to Master Jean."

"But you can't save everyone if you break yourself, Noelle-san," Haruka said gently.

Noelle stared at them. It was rare for anyone to scold her for working *too* hard. Usually, people just thanked her and gave her more work. She gripped the handle of her mop.

"I..." Noelle hesitated. "I never thought of it that way. I just..."

"Oh! The Heroes from yesterday!" Noelle suddenly realized who she was talking to, her eyes lighting up to deflect the heavy topic. "I heard about you! You helped Amber and Kaeya!"

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The conversation was cut short.

The ground beneath their feet jumped. A massive roar echoed from the direction of Starfell Lake, followed by a rising mushroom cloud that towered over the city walls.

"What was that?!" Ichika gasped, grabbing Haruka. "An explosion? Is it the Abyss?"

"That came from the lake," Haruka said, her face pale. "The hotel manager said Amber took Mafuyu that way. If they were caught in that..."

They looked ready to sprint toward the gates.

"Please, do not panic!"

Noelle's voice was surprisingly calm. She placed the mop down gently. She looked at the mushroom cloud, shielding her eyes to squint at the shape of it.

"That explosion pattern..." Noelle mused. "High Pyro concentration. Overload reaction. Followed by the scattering of local wildlife."

She turned to Haruka and Ichika with a reassuring smile.

"That is almost certainly the Spark Knight, Klee."

"Klee?" Ichika blinked.

"Yes. She is... enthusiastic," Noelle explained politely. "I saw the deployment roster this morning while I was dusting Master Jean's office. Amber was assigned to retrieve Klee from Starfell Lake. And your friend, Miss Asahina, was listed as accompanying them."

"Wait," Haruka processed this. "So that explosion... wasn't an attack on them? It was *them*?"

"Most likely," Noelle nodded. "If Klee is involved, explosions are... a standard form of greeting. I am sure Outrider Amber has the situation under control. Or... mostly under control."

Noelle picked up her broom again.

"If anything, I should probably prepare a bath and fresh clothes. Klee usually returns covered in soot. And perhaps some tea for your friend. She might be in shock."

Haruka and Ichika looked at the mushroom cloud, then at the calm maid.

"This world," Ichika sighed, slumping her shoulders. "Is terrifying."

"But," Haruka smiled slightly, looking at Noelle. "It seems to have good people."

Chapter 15: Chapter 10.4: The Feast of Survivors

Location: The Good Hunter

The sun had set over Mondstadt, painting the sky in deep purples and oranges. The lanterns of the Good Hunter restaurant flickered warmly, welcoming the weary.

Haruka, Ichika, and Noelle were the first to arrive. Or rather, Haruka and Ichika dragged Noelle to a table.

"Please, really, I should be serving you!" Noelle protested, holding a tray she had instinctively grabbed from the counter. "Guests should not be hosting the host!"

"Sit," Haruka said gently but firmly, pushing Noelle onto a bench. "We spent six hours moving rocks. You are forbidden from lifting anything heavier than a spoon for the rest of the night."

"But—"

"It’s an idol’s order," Ichika added with a tired smile, winking at Haruka.

Noelle froze halfway to the bench. Her eyes went wide.

"Idol?" Noelle repeated the word as if it were sacred. She looked at Haruka, then at Ichika. "You mean... like Miss Barbara?"

Haruka blinked, surprised. "You have idols here in Mondstadt?"

"Oh, yes!" Noelle clasped her hands together, her face lighting up with genuine admiration. "Deaconess Barbara! She is the shining light of the Church of Favonius. She sings to heal people’s hearts and bodies. She calls herself an 'idol'!"

"A healing idol..." Haruka mused, a small, professional smile touching her lips. "That sounds wonderful. I suppose the desire to make people smile through song is universal."

"Wait," Amber interjected, sliding into the seat opposite them. "Does that mean you guys are famous back home? I mean, Barbara has fan clubs and everything. Do you have a fan club, Haruka?"

Haruka looked away, taking a sudden interest in the tablecloth. "Ah... well. I used to perform. It was... a different life."

"She was amazing," Ichika blurted out, coming to her friend's defense. "She filled stadiums!"

"Stadiums?!" Amber and Noelle gasped in unison.

"Hmph!"

A loud scoff interrupted the moment. Tsukasa marched up to the table, looking disheveled but proud, with Aether and Paimon trailing behind him.

"Stadiums are impressive, yes," Tsukasa declared, striking a pose (and wincing as his back cracked). "But a true Star shines regardless of the venue! Whether it is a stadium or a... very scary library... the impact is what matters!"

"He's just jealous because Lisa liked the quiet ones better," Aether whispered to Noelle as he sat down.

"I heard that!" Tsukasa yelled.

Team Lisa joined the table. Amber and Mafuyu arrived moments later—Amber looking exhausted and soot-stained, Mafuyu looking eerily calm.

"We're here," Amber sighed, collapsing onto the bench. "I dropped Klee off. She's... safe."

"Mafuyu-san?" Haruka looked at her friend concernedly. "Are you hurt?"

"I watched a child vaporize a lake," Mafuyu said flatly.

The table went silent. Then, unexpectedly, Tsukasa burst out laughing.

"Aha! So this world is filled with eccentrics! Healing Idols, Explosive Children, and Librarians who wield lightning like a conductor's baton!"

Tsukasa grabbed a fork and pointed it at the sky.

"It seems we shall fit right in!"

"Speak for yourself," Paimon grumbled. "Paimon just wants to fit food in her mouth."

"Order up!" Sara arrived with the massive platter. "Sticky Honey Roast for the heroes!"

As they ate, the conversation drifted back to music. Noelle shyly asked Haruka about "idol training," while Tsukasa demanded to know if this "Barbara" was a worthy rival for a World Future Star. Even Mafuyu listened, her eyes lingering on the lute playing softly in the background.

For a moment, the barrier between worlds felt thin. Music, after all, was a language they all spoke.

"So," Haruka said later, wiping her mouth as the plates were cleared. "The temples are clear. The immediate threat is gone. What happens next?"

Aether’s expression turned serious. He leaned forward.

"The storm is gone, but Dvalin is still suffering. We need to find a way to cut off the corruption completely."

"Lisa mentioned something," Aether continued. "About the dragon's connection to Barbatos. If we want to save him, we need to understand the history."

"And where do we find that?" Tsukasa asked.

Aether pointed toward the upper city, where a large statue stood in the plaza.

"There's a bard," Aether said. "A guy in green. We saw him in the woods talking to the dragon. If anyone knows what's going on... it's him."

"The green guy?" Paimon tilted her head. "The Tone-Deaf Bard?"

"Exactly," Aether nodded. "We need to find him."

"Then it is decided!" Tsukasa slammed his hand on the table. "Tomorrow, the Teyvat Expedition Team hunts for this bard! We shall extract the truth with..."

He paused.

"With polite questioning!" Ichika finished for him.

"Yes! Polite questioning!" Tsukasa agreed.

"And maybe," Haruka added softly, looking at Noelle. "We can meet this Barbara, too. I think... I'd like to hear her sing."

Noelle beamed. "I will introduce you! She would love to meet fellow idols!"

Mafuyu looked up at the moon hanging over Mondstadt.

‘A child who destroys. A maid who carries the world. An idol who heals.’

She looked at her friends, laughing around the table.

‘And us. Still here.’

"Tomorrow," Mafuyu whispered to herself.

Chapter 16: Chapter 11: The Bard of Wind and Song

Location: Mondstadt Streets (Night)

The feast at the Good Hunter finally wound down. Noelle insisted on clearing the table (despite Haruka's protests), and Amber had to drag herself home to rest for her morning patrol.

"Get some sleep, guys!" Amber waved, walking down the street with Noelle. "We'll check in on you tomorrow!"

"Goodnight!" Ichika waved back, watching them disappear around the corner.

The remaining group—Aether, Paimon, and the four students—began the walk back toward the Goth Grand Hotel. The city was quiet now, the stone streets illuminated by the soft glow of streetlamps and the massive moon overhead.

"So," Tsukasa said, patting his full stomach. "The plan remains! Tomorrow at dawn, the Teyvat Expedition Team begins the Great Bard Hunt! We shall scour every tavern and street corner until we find this 'green guy'!"

"We should probably start at the plaza," Haruka suggested logically. "Street performers usually favor high-traffic areas."

"Agreed!" Tsukasa nodded. "We shall extract the truth with—"

"Wait."

Mafuyu stopped abruptly. She wasn't looking at the hotel. She was looking up a side staircase that led toward the Cathedral.

"What is it, Asahina?" Tsukasa asked, stopping mid-stride.

Mafuyu pointed a finger toward a figure slipping quietly through the shadows of the upper walkway. A boy in green, with a cape that fluttered like leaves in the wind, holding a wooden lyre.

"That hat," Mafuyu whispered. "And the braid. Isn't that him?"

Aether squinted. "It is! That's the guy from the woods!"

"He's getting away!" Paimon gasped. "Quick! Before he disappears again!"

"The hunt begins early!" Tsukasa declared, spinning on his heel. "After him!"

Location: Anemo Archon Plaza

They followed the bard up the winding stone steps to the massive plaza beneath the towering statue of Barbatos. But they didn't have to chase him down.

He wasn't running. He was performing.

A small crowd had already gathered by the time they arrived. Venti stood at the base of the statue, his lyre in hand. He plucked the strings, and the sound was crisp and clear, carrying effortlessly over the night wind.

" *'The dragon who defended Mondstadt in the ancient past...'* " Venti sang, his voice weaving a story of old struggles and forgotten friendships.

The PJSK group slowed down, standing at the back of the crowd so as not to interrupt.

Ichika stopped breathing for a second. As a musician, she recognized it immediately. The technique. The projection. The raw emotion.

'He's good,' Ichika thought, entranced. *'He's not just playing notes. He's telling a story with the pitch.'*

Haruka crossed her arms, analyzing him with a professional eye. *'He commands the crowd's attention effortlessly. No stage lights, no backup dancers. Just charisma.'*

Tsukasa, however, narrowed his eyes critically.

"His projection is excellent," Tsukasa whispered loudly to Aether. "But his staging is lacking! Where are the pyrotechnics? Where is the dramatic lighting? A Star would never perform in such dim conditions!"

"Shh!" Paimon slapped Tsukasa's arm. "Listen!"

Venti continued the song, telling the tragedy of Dvalin—how the dragon swallowed the corrupted blood to save the city, only to be forgotten and descend into madness.

As the song reached its sorrowful climax, Mafuyu felt a strange sensation in her chest. The Anemo energy she had absorbed at the statue... it hummed. It resonated with the sadness in the bard's voice.

'Forgotten...' Mafuyu thought, watching the bard's eyes. *'He sounds like he misses him.'*

Venti strummed the final chord. The wind swirled around him, lifting his cape dramatically as he bowed.

"Thank you, thank you!" Venti chirped, his sorrowful demeanor vanishing instantly into a playful grin. "If you enjoyed the performance, spare a Mora for a thirsty bard? Or perhaps an apple?"

The crowd clapped and dispersed. Venti began counting the few coins tossed into his hat.

"That was... quite the performance," Aether said, stepping forward.

Venti looked up. His teal eyes sparkled with recognition.

"Oh? It's you!" Venti smiled, putting his lyre away. "The Traveler who scared away the dragon! And..."

He looked past Aether, his gaze landing on the four teenagers in school uniforms. He paused, sniffing the air slightly.

"Ooh," Venti's eyes widened. "And friends from very, very far away. You smell like... distant stars. And a hint of processed sugar."

"That would be the Sticky Honey Roast," Tsukasa clarified, stepping forward and placing a hand on his chest. "Greetings, Bard! I am Tsukasa Tenma! A World Future Star! I must say, your vocal control is adequate, though your stage presence could use—"

"Tsukasa-senpai, please," Ichika nudged him back, bowing politely. "Your song... it was beautiful. You sang about the dragon as if you knew him."

Venti's smile softened. "Did I? Well, a bard knows many tales. Old and new."

He turned back to Aether, his expression turning slightly more serious. "But I suspect you didn't come here just to critique my rhyming scheme."

Aether reached into his pocket. He pulled out the crimson crystal—the **Teardrop** he had found in the woods.

"We found this," Aether said. "It's full of anger. And it looks like the crystals on Dvalin's back."

Venti looked at the crystal. "Ah. A Teardrop. A crystallized wound."

He reached out, his fingers hovering over the glowing red gem.

"He is in pain," Venti whispered, his voice losing its playful lilt. "He feels betrayed. Abandoned. The abyss mages are using that pain to twist his mind."

"Betrayed?" Mafuyu spoke up. It was the first time she had spoken directly to a stranger.

Venti looked at her. He tilted his head, seemingly fascinated by the hollow look in her eyes.

"Yes," Venti said softly. "Imagine protecting something with all your heart... only to wake up centuries later and find that the world you saved is afraid of you."

Mafuyu stared at the crystal. *Protecting something... only to be feared.* The concept felt uncomfortably familiar.

"Can we fix it?" Haruka asked, stepping into the practical role. "If this is causing his madness, can we purify it?"

"Usually, no," Venti admitted. "It contains potent corruption. A normal person would be burned just touching it." He looked at Aether. "But you... you purified it, didn't you, Traveler?"

Aether nodded. The crystal in his hand was no longer angry red; it was a clear, light blue.

"And you four..." Venti looked at the PJSK group. He walked closer to them, circling Tsukasa and Ichika. "You don't have Visions. But the wind clings to you. It likes you."

He stopped in front of Tsukasa.

"You have a loud soul," Venti laughed. "The wind finds it amusing."

"Amusing?!" Tsukasa spluttered.

"I have a plan," Venti announced, clapping his hands. "To save Dvalin, we don't need swords. We need to remind him of who he used to be. We need to summon him."

"Summon a dragon?" Paimon gulped. "How?"

"With the **Holy Lyre der Himmel**," Venti declared dramatically. "The lyre that Barbatos used in ancient times. It is kept in the Cathedral."

He pointed a finger at the massive church behind them.

"It is a national treasure. Surely, if we explain the situation, the church will lend it to us, right?"

"I doubt it," Haruka said skeptically. "National treasures aren't usually loaned out to street performers and strangers."

"Not with *that* attitude!" Venti winked. "Come on! Let's go ask! Maybe they're fans of my work!"

He skipped off toward the Cathedral.

"He is... surprisingly energetic," Ichika noted.

"He's suspicious," Aether muttered, though he followed.

"He lacks discipline!" Tsukasa critiqued. "But he has spirit! I shall observe his methods!"

As they walked toward the Cathedral, Mafuyu lingered for a second, looking at the statue of the Archon. The statue looked remarkably like the bard who had just sung for an apple.

‘He hides it well,’ Mafuyu thought, turning to follow them. *‘The mask.’*

Chapter 17: Chapter 12: The Heist

Location: Mondstadt Cathedral (Entrance)

"They threw me out!"

Venti burst through the massive oak doors of the Cathedral, looking less like a god and more like a pouting child. He skipped down the steps to where the group was hiding behind a pillar.

"They didn't want to lend the national treasure to a street performer?" Haruka asked, crossing her arms. "I am shocked."

"The Nun was very rude!" Venti huffed. "I even offered to write a ballad in her honor! She said, and I quote, *'The Holy Lyre is not a toy for drunken bards.'* Can you believe the audacity?"

Aether sighed. "So, Plan B?"

"Plan B!" Venti grinned, his demeanor shifting instantly from offended to mischievous. "If they won't lend it to us... we borrow it permanently! Tonight!"

"Theft?!" Ichika whispered, looking around nervously to see if the guards heard. "We're going to steal from a church?"

"It is a holy mission!" Venti corrected. "To save a dragon! Now, we need a stealth team."

"Leave it to me!"

Tsukasa Tenma stepped forward, flipping his coat dramatically. The long shadows of evening cast a dramatic silhouette behind him.

"I, Tsukasa Tenma, act as the phantom thief! I have played the role of a rogue in *The Phantom of the Opera House*! My stealth is impeccable! I shall slip in like a shadow and—"

"Absolutely not," Haruka said flatly.

Tsukasa froze. "Eh?"

"Tsukasa-senpai," Haruka listed off the reasons on her fingers. "One: You project your voice when you get excited. Two: You are wearing a coat that flaps in the wind. Three: You have a tendency to pose after every success."

She looked him dead in the eye.

"You are the loudest person in Teyvat. If you go in there, the Knights will catch us in five seconds."

Tsukasa opened his mouth to argue, but then he looked at Aether, who was nodding in agreement. He looked at Ichika, who looked apologetic.

"Gah...!" Tsukasa clutched his chest. "My own troupe... betraying me..."

"We need agility," Haruka continued, turning to Venti. "I have dance training. I know how to control my footsteps and balance. I'll go with Aether."

"Excellent choice!" Venti clapped. "The Idol and the Hero! A classic pairing."

"Then what is *my* role?" Tsukasa demanded, trying to salvage his dignity.

Venti pointed toward the lower district of the city, specifically a high rooftop near the tavern district.

"We need an extraction beacon. Once we jump from the Cathedral, we need to know the coast is clear near the hideout. Tsukasa, go to that high roof overlooking the market. Be our lighthouse! When you see us jump, signal us!"

"A lighthouse..." Tsukasa rubbed his chin. "A beacon of hope for the escaping heroes... The Star that guides the way..."

He struck a pose. "Very well! I accept this critical role! I shall shine so brightly you cannot miss me!"

"Please don't shine *too* brightly," Ichika muttered. "Or the guards will arrest you."

"Ichika, Paimon," Venti directed. "You wait in the shadows outside the Cathedral side door. If things go wrong, create a distraction."

"Got it!" Paimon saluted.

"Wait," Haruka realized a fatal flaw. "Aether has a wind glider. I don't. If we have to jump from the Cathedral spire... I can't fly."

"Ah, right," Aether realized. "We haven't found a glider for you yet."

"No problem!" Venti plucked a string on his lyre. A soft, turquoise light swirled around Haruka's uniform.

"Barbatos's Blessing: Featherweight."

Haruka felt her body become impossibly light. The gravity pulling at her boots seemed to vanish.

"It's a temporary spell!" Venti winked. "It won't let you fly like a bird, but if you jump, the wind will catch you like a falling leaf. Just don't flail around, okay?"

Haruka tested it, jumping slightly. She floated down in slow motion. "Incredible..."

"Alright," Aether adjusted his gloves, looking at the darkened sky. "Midnight is almost here. Let's move."

Location: Inside the Cathedral (Basement)

The Cathedral was silent, save for the echoing footsteps of the guards patrolling the upper levels.

Aether and Haruka crouched in the shadows of the basement stairwell.

"Guard pattern is simple," Haruka whispered, her eyes tracking the Knights. "Two patrols. They intersect every forty seconds. We have a ten-second window to cross the hall."

Aether looked at her, impressed. "You're good at this."

"It's just like stage blocking," Haruka replied, focused. "Memorize the positions. Don't miss your cue."

"Go."

They moved. Aether dashed silently, his boots barely making a sound. Haruka followed, moving with fluid grace. She didn't run; she glided, her steps light and precise, avoiding the squeaky floorboards she had identified earlier.

They reached the inner sanctum. The Holy Lyre der Himmel sat on a pedestal, glowing with a faint Anemo light.

"There it is," Aether whispered.

They approached the pedestal. Aether reached out his hand.

Flash.

A jagged bolt of Electro energy crackled through the air.

"Watch out!" Haruka shoved Aether aside.

A figure materialized from invisibility—a tall, masked agent of the Fatui. He snatched the Lyre from the pedestal with a gloved hand.

"The Fatui!" Aether hissed, drawing his sword.

"Signora will be pleased," the Agent sneered. He didn't stay to fight. He vanished into smoke, sprinting toward the exit.

"He's getting away!" Haruka yelled.

"INTRUDERS!" a guard shouted from the doorway. The alarm bells began to ring. *CLANG. CLANG. CLANG.*

"We've been spotted!" Aether grabbed Haruka’s arm. "We have to run! The window!"

The Escape

They sprinted through the basement, bursting out into the main hall. Guards were pouring in from the front entrance.

"This way!" Aether kicked open a side window that led to the upper balcony.

They scrambled onto the ledge. The drop was massive. The city of Mondstadt sprawled below them in the dark, but the streets were beginning to fill with torchlight as the Knights mobilized.

"Ichika! Paimon!" Haruka yelled down.

Below, in the bushes, Ichika popped up. "Haruka-chan! The guards are coming!"

"Run to the lower district!" Haruka commanded. "We're jumping!"

Aether grabbed Haruka’s hand. "Trust the wind!"

They jumped.

Aether snapped his wind glider open—blue wings catching the night air. Haruka didn't have wings, but Venti’s spell kicked in. A swirl of green energy wrapped around her, slowing her descent so she glided alongside Aether like a spirit.

"I see him!" Aether pointed.

Far below, near the tavern district, a figure was standing on a tiled rooftop.

Tsukasa Tenma was holding a lantern in each hand, waving them frantically like a human signal tower.

"OVER HERE! MY AUDIENCE! OVER HERE!" Tsukasa’s voice carried faintly over the wind.

"He's... definitely a visual marker," Haruka sighed, though she smiled with relief.

They soared over the rooftops, Ichika and Paimon sprinting through the alleyways below to meet them.

Location: Rooftops near Angel's Share

Aether and Haruka landed on the roof with a soft thud. Venti (who had seemingly materialized out of nowhere) was already there, swinging his legs over the edge next to Tsukasa.

"You failed," Venti noted cheerfully.

"Hey!" Paimon stomped the air, floating right up to Venti's face. "Why do you sound so happy about it?! And wipe that smirk off your face, you Tone-Deaf Bard! We almost got thrown in jail while you were sitting here enjoying the view!"

"Technically," Haruka interjected, landing beside them and smoothing out her skirt. She looked frustrated, her analytical mind already racing. "We didn't fail due to incompetence. We failed because of a third party."

She looked at Venti grimly.

"The Fatui stole it right in front of us."

"The Fatui..." Venti’s smile dropped instantly. "That complicates things."

"The guards are searching the streets!" Tsukasa hissed, extinguishing his lanterns. "We cannot stay here! We need a hideout!"

"I know a place," Venti pointed to the building directly beneath them. "The tavern. **Angel's Share**."

"A tavern?" Ichika climbed up the ladder to the roof, panting. "But... the Knights patrol there."

"The owner isn't fond of the Knights," Venti winked. "Come on! Before Kaeya figures out who the 'Inazuman Drifters' really are!"

Location: Angel's Share (Interior)

The door to the tavern creaked open.

It was late, and the bar was mostly empty. Standing behind the counter was a man with fiery red hair, dressed in a pristine black coat. He was wiping a glass with methodical, cold precision.

Diluc Ragnvindr.

He looked up as the group burst in—a bard, a traveler, a floating child, and four teenagers in dirty school uniforms.

Diluc’s expression didn't change. He looked at them with the enthusiasm of a man watching paint dry.

"Master Jean's 'guests'," Diluc noted, his voice flat. He looked at Venti. "And the bard. To what do I owe the pleasure of this... circus?"

"Hi, Master Diluc!" Venti chirped. "We need a place to hide! Preferably somewhere with wine!"

"Hide?" Diluc raised an eyebrow.

Before he could refuse, heavy knocking pounded on the tavern door.

"Open up! Knights of Favonius!"

Tsukasa froze. "The guards!"

"We're wanted criminals!" Paimon shrieked.

Diluc looked at the terrified teenagers. He looked at the door. Then, he let out a long, suffering sigh.

He pointed a gloved finger toward the back stairs.

"Upstairs. Second floor. Keep your mouths shut."

"Thank you!" Ichika whispered.

They scrambled up the stairs just as the front door burst open. Two knights marched in.

"Master Diluc!" the guard announced. "Have you seen a blonde traveler and... well, a very loud group of thieves pass by?"

Diluc didn't blink. He picked up another glass.

"No," Diluc lied smoothly. "I haven't seen anyone."

Chapter 18: Chapter 13: The Darknight Hero

Location: Angel's Share (Second Floor)

The heavy oak door downstairs slammed shut. The Knights were gone.

Diluc Ragnvindr walked slowly up the stairs, his boots thudding against the wood with ominous rhythm. He stopped at the top, crossing his arms as he looked at the group of fugitives huddled near the balcony.

"The Knights are gone," Diluc stated, his voice devoid of warmth. "Now. Explain why the 'Heroes of Mondstadt' are currently wanted for grand larceny."

"It was a misunderstanding!" Paimon squeaked, hiding behind Aether.

"We were trying to save the dragon!" Tsukasa declared, stepping forward. He tried to match Diluc's imposing stance but failed significantly. "Sir Bartender! You possess a burning aura! Surely you understand that sometimes a Star must break the rules to rewrite the script!"

Diluc stared at Tsukasa. "I don't care about scripts. I care about Mondstadt's safety."

He turned his gaze to Venti. "And you. The bard. You seem to be the ringleader."

"Ehe~" Venti winked. "Well, you see, Master Diluc... the story is quite tragic. Would you like to hear it in D-Major or G-Minor?"

"Plain speech," Diluc warned. "Or I hand you over to the guards myself."

"Fine, fine," Venti sighed, dropping the act. He explained everything—Dvalin's corruption, the Holy Lyre's power, and the Fatui's interference.

As Venti spoke, Haruka watched Diluc closely.

'He's calculating,' Haruka analyzed. *'He pretends to be indifferent, but he hid us. He hates the Knights, but he loves the city.'*

When Venti finished, silence filled the tavern.

"The Fatui," Diluc murmured, his eyes narrowing. "They stole the Lyre to harness its power... or destroy it. If they succeed, Dvalin is lost."

He walked over to the window, looking out at the sleeping city.

"Very well. I will help you."

"You will?" Ichika asked, surprised.

"The Knights are inefficient," Diluc scoffed. "If we leave this to them, bureaucracy will kill the dragon before the Fatui do. We need to act outside the law."

He turned back to them.

"But I cannot do this alone. I need a contact within the Knights. Someone who isn't blinded by protocol."

"Kaeya?" Tsukasa suggested. "He seemed... sneaky."

"Absolutely not," Diluc's face darkened instantly. "I have someone else in mind. Stay here. Don't move. And for Archon's sake..." He looked at Tsukasa. "Keep your voice down."

Later that Night

The tavern was closed. The lights were dimmed.

The PJSK group sat around a table on the ground floor. Venti was happily drinking a glass of dandelion wine (on Diluc's tab), while Haruka and Ichika anxiously watched the door.

Click.

The lock turned. The door opened.

Diluc entered first. "They are inside."

A second figure followed him. She wasn't wearing her blue coat or armor. She was dressed in civilian clothes—a simple white blouse and trousers. She looked tired.

It was **Jean**.

"Master Jean?!" Paimon gasped.

Jean stopped when she saw them. Her eyes widened.

"Traveler?" Jean looked at Aether, then at the four students. "And... you four? *You* were the intruders at the Cathedral?"

Tsukasa flinched, hiding behind his hands. "We can explain! It was... uh... method acting!"

"We stole it," Mafuyu said quietly from the corner. "Or... we tried to."

Jean closed her eyes, letting out a long, weary sigh. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I assume," Jean said, looking at Venti, "that this was your idea?"

"To save Dvalin!" Venti cheered, raising his glass.

Jean walked over to the table. She didn't look angry. She looked... relieved.

"When I heard someone tried to steal the Holy Lyre," Jean admitted, pulling out a chair and sitting down heavily. "I feared it was greed. Or the Abyss. But if it was you..."

She looked at Aether, then at Haruka and Ichika.

"Then you were trying to purify him. You were trying to save him, weren't you?"

"Yes," Haruka nodded. "But the Fatui got there first."

"The Fatui..." Jean's hands clenched into fists on the table. "They have been pressuring me to kill Dvalin. If they have the Lyre... they hold all the cards."

Mafuyu watched Jean.

She saw the slump in Jean's shoulders. The dark circles under her eyes that the dim light couldn't hide.

'She carries everything,' Mafuyu thought. *'Just like Noelle. But Noelle has hope. Jean just has... duty.'*

"Jean," Diluc spoke up from the bar, where he was pouring grape juice. "You can't handle this officially. If the Grand Master is caught working with thieves, the Fatui will have your badge."

"I know," Jean said softly. She looked up, her violet eyes burning with resolve. "That is why I am here as Jean. Not as the Grand Master."

She looked at the group.

"We must retrieve the Lyre before the Fatui can use it. Do we have a lead?"

"I have contacts," Diluc said, placing a glass of juice in front of Jean. "The Fatui have a hidden stronghold near the cliffs. My sources say they moved a 'precious artifact' there an hour ago."

"Then we raid it," Tsukasa slammed his hand on the table (gently this time). "The Teyvat Expedition Team, plus the Darknight Hero, plus the Grand Master! We are unstoppable!"

"Darknight Hero?" Diluc frowned. "Don't call me that."

"It fits!" Paimon giggled.

"We move at dawn," Jean decided, standing up. She looked at the four students. "You are civilians. You do not have to do this. You are already wanted criminals because of tonight. If you come with us..."

"We're already in," Ichika stood up, her fists clenched. "We started this. We want to finish it."

"Besides," Haruka added, smiling slightly. "We can't let the 'villains' keep the treasure, can we?"

Jean smiled—a real, genuine smile.

"Thank you," she whispered. "For fighting for Mondstadt."

Chapter 19: Chapter 14: The Shadow of the Stronghold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Hidden Fatui Stronghold (Near Springvale)

The entrance to the hideout was concealed within a jagged crevice of the cliffside, marked only by a faint elemental signature that Aether's sight picked up.

Diluc adjusted his black gloves, staring into the dark tunnel.

"Remember," Diluc said, his voice low. "Once we cross this threshold, we are not the Knights, and we are not citizens. We are shadows."

"Understood!" Tsukasa whispered loudly, pulling his collar up to cover the lower half of his face. "The Phantom Thief Persona is fully engaged!"

"Just... stay behind me," Diluc sighed.

Jean stood next to them, looking uncomfortable without her armor. She wore a simple traveler's cloak to hide her identity.

"I cannot be seen using my Anemo arts too openly," Jean warned. "If a Fatui survivor recognizes the Gunnhildr technique, it will cause a diplomatic incident."

"Leave the wind to us!" Haruka stepped forward. "We have no style to recognize. We're just... unruly gusts."

"Spoken like a true poet," Venti giggled, strumming a muted chord on his lyre. "Shall we proceed? The Holy Lyre awaits!"

The Infiltration

The interior was cold, constructed of heavy stone and Snezhnayan machinery. Fatui Skirmishers patrolled the hallways—hulking men in elemental armor.

They crouched behind a stack of crates.

"Two guards," Aether signaled. "An Electro Hammer and a Geo Chanter."

"We need a distraction," Diluc noted, reaching for his claymore. "Or I can simply—"

"Wait!" Tsukasa grabbed Diluc's arm. "Master Diluc! Violence is efficient, but deception is an art! Allow me to bluff our way past!"

Diluc looked at Tsukasa like he had grown a second head. "Bluff?"

"I am an actor!" Tsukasa declared. "I shall pretend to be a visiting dignitary!"

Before Diluc could stop him, Tsukasa marched out from behind the crates. He puffed out his chest and pointed at the guards.

"YOU THERE! SUBORDINATES!" Tsukasa bellowed, affecting a terrible, overly posh accent. "I am... Inspector Tsukasa! From the... uh... The North! I am here to inspect the Lyre! Stand aside!"

The two Fatui guards stared at him.

"Inspector?" The Electro Hammer guard grunted, towering over the boy. He looked Tsukasa up and down—at his bright, colorful clothes, his unmasked face, and his complete lack of Snezhnayan military bearing.

"You don't look like an inspector," the guard scoffed, hefting his hammer. "You look like a civilian playing dress-up. Where is your insignia?"

"It is... uh... currently being polished!" Tsukasa panicked, sweat forming on his brow. "Do you dare question the Tsaritsa's protocols?!"

The guard raised his hammer. "Intruder."

"Plan B!" Tsukasa shrieked, diving backward.

"Burn."

Diluc surged past Tsukasa, his claymore engulfed in flames. With a single, brutal swing, he smashed the Electro guard's shield. Jean moved in perfect sync, using a non-elemental thrust to knock the Geo Chanter off balance.

Within seconds, the guards were unconscious.

"Nice acting," Paimon slow-clapped.

"I bought time for the strike!" Tsukasa insisted, dusting himself off. "It was a tactical distraction!"

"Let's keep moving," Jean said, though she hid a small smile.

The Maze

Deeper in the complex, the layout became confusing. Moving platforms and elemental traps blocked the way.

"This architecture makes no sense," Ichika muttered, looking at a floating platform. "Why put a flamethrower in a hallway?"

"To deter guests," Haruka answered plainly.

She watched the fire traps spewing flames in a set pattern. *Fwoosh. Pause. Fwoosh.*

"It’s a rhythm," Haruka analyzed. "Three seconds on. Two seconds off. We move on the off-beat. Ichika, Mafuyu, stick close to me."

Haruka took point. "And... *move*."

She dashed through the trap. Ichika followed. Mafuyu hesitated, staring at the fire.

"Mafuyu!" Amber (who wasn't there, but her voice echoed in Mafuyu’s head) would have yelled.

Mafuyu took a breath. She didn't run; she let the Anemo power surge.

"Void Step."

She dashed forward, a burst of cold wind propelling her faster than humanly possible. She cleared the trap with a second to spare.

"Whoa," Paimon blinked. "Mafuyu is fast!"

"I just... wanted to be on the other side," Mafuyu murmured.

Jean watched Mafuyu closely. She saw the precision. The lack of wasted movement.

"You have excellent control," Jean complimented her softly. "But you hold your breath when you move. You must remember to breathe, or you will faint."

Mafuyu looked at Jean. The Acting Grand Master—the symbol of perfection—was giving her advice.

"Yes, Grand Master," Mafuyu said instinctively.

"Jean," Jean corrected gently. "In here, I am just Jean."

The Inner Sanctum

They reached the final room. The Holy Lyre der Himmel sat suspended in a containment field in the center of a large arena.

But it wasn't unguarded.

A tall woman in purple robes floated in the air, surrounded by three small, buzzing Electro Cicins (bats). An **Electro Cicin Mage**.

"My, my," the Mage giggled, her voice distorted by her mask. "More little mice coming to play? And you brought... children?"

She pointed a clawed finger at the four students huddled near the entrance.

"Leave the children out of this," Diluc growled, igniting his blade.

"Oh, but they look so... shockable!"

The Mage raised her lantern. *ZZAAPP.*

A massive bolt of lightning arched toward Haruka.

"Haruka-chan!" Ichika screamed.

Ichika didn't have a sword. She didn't have a shield. But she had the desire to protect.

She threw her hands up. The Anemo energy inside her didn't swirl; it solidified. A wall of compressed wind formed in front of Haruka.

BOOM.

The lightning hit the wind wall and scattered harmlessly.

"A barrier?" The Mage tilted her head. "How annoying."

"Now!" Aether yelled.

The team sprang into action.

- **Diluc** charged the center, his Pyro claymore clashing with the Mage’s Electro shield.
- **Jean** flanked left, using her wind to pull the annoying Cicins out of the air.
- **Tsukasa** ran to the right. "HEY! OVER HERE! LIGHTNING LADY!" He unleashed a chaotic blast of wind that messed up the Mage’s floating trajectory.
- **Venti** stood in the back, playing a battle tune. "Go team! Hit the lantern!"

"Mafuyu! Haruka!" Aether commanded. "The cage!"

While the heavy hitters distracted the Mage, Haruka and Mafuyu ran for the containment field holding the Lyre.

"It’s locked," Haruka analyzed the mechanism. "Four keyholes. We need the key."

"No," Mafuyu whispered. She placed her hand on the lock. She felt the wind. Wind could erode rock. Wind could slip through cracks.

"We don't need a key," Mafuyu said.

She channeled her Anemo power into the lock mechanism. It wasn't a blast; it was a high-pressure injection of air.

Click. Click. SNAP.

The lock shattered from the internal pressure. The cage lowered.

"Grab it!" Haruka yelled.

Mafuyu snatched the Holy Lyre.

"THEY HAVE THE PRIZE!" the Mage shrieked, trying to disengage from Diluc.

"I think not," Diluc stated calmly.

"Dawn."

A massive fire phoenix erupted from Diluc's blade, consuming the Mage and blasting her into the far wall. The impact shook the entire dungeon.

"Retreat!" Jean ordered. "We have what we came for!"

The Escape

They sprinted out of the stronghold, bursting back into the cool night air of Mondstadt.

They didn't stop running until they reached the cover of the woods.

"We... *huff*... we did it," Tsukasa panted, leaning against a tree. "The Star... triumphs again."

Jean looked at the Holy Lyre in Mafuyu's hands. It glowed faintly, though the energy felt weaker than in the stories.

"The Holy Lyre der Himmel," Jean breathed, touching the wood reverently. "We actually retrieved it."

"And nobody saw us!" Paimon cheered. "Except the guys we beat up!"

"Good work," Diluc nodded, though he was looking at Ichika. "That barrier... it was sturdy. You have good instincts."

Ichika blushed, looking at her hands. "I just... didn't want Haruka to get hurt."

"And Mafuyu," Venti floated over, looking at the lock-picking hand. "You picked a Fatui lock with brute-force wind? How... delightfully violent!"

Mafuyu looked at the Lyre. "It was in the way."

"Now," Aether said, looking at the Lyre. "We have the instrument. But Venti said it needs to be purified before we can use it to summon Dvalin."

"That's right!" Venti took the Lyre. He frowned. "Oof. It's definitely seen better days. The Anemo power has almost run dry. It's more like the 'Holy Lyre of... Meh' right now."

"Can you fix it?" Haruka asked.

"Me? No," Venti shrugged. "But... *we* can. With a little help from the Traveler's purifying Teardrops."

He looked at the group.

"Let's head back to the Winery," Diluc suggested. "It’s safer than the city right now. We can plan the summoning ritual there."

"Sleepover at the rich guy's house!" Paimon cheered.

As they began the trek to the Dawn Winery, Jean fell into step beside the exhausted students.

"You fought bravely," Jean said softly, so only they could hear. "Thank you. For protecting my city."

"It's not our city," Mafuyu replied automatically.

Jean smiled sadly. "Perhaps not. But you protected it all the same."

Chapter End Notes

For people thinking that there's an IchiHaruka moment, no.

again, no parings for Haruka for now

Chapter 20: Chapter 15: The Teardrop Crystal

Location: Dawn Winery

The group arrived at the Dawn Winery under the cover of darkness. The massive estate stood silent amidst the vineyards, warm light spilling from its windows.

"Whoa," Tsukasa gasped, forgetting his exhaustion for a moment. He spun around, taking in the architecture. "This is... magnificent! It is a mansion fit for a Star! Master Diluc, are you secretly a prince?"

"I'm a winemaker," Diluc muttered, pushing the heavy double doors open. "And keep your voice down. The staff are asleep."

"Welcome home, Master Diluc," a maid—Adelinde—appeared almost instantly, bowing politely. She didn't even blink at the sight of the ragtag troupe, the floating child, or the Acting Grand Master in civilian clothes. "Shall I prepare refreshments?"

"Just grape juice. And secure the perimeter," Diluc ordered. "We are not to be disturbed."

They moved to the main hall. Aether placed the **Holy Lyre der Himmel** on the central table. It sat there, dull and cracked, its wood splintering.

"It looks... dead," Ichika whispered.

"It is," Venti sighed, running a finger over a broken string. "Its Anemo power has faded. In this state, playing it would sound like a dying hilichurl. It won't reach Dvalin."

"So we stole a paperweight?" Haruka asked, crossing her arms.

"Not quite!" Venti turned to Aether. "Traveler, do you still have that **Teardrop Crystal** you purified in the woods? And the ones from the temples?"

Aether nodded. He reached into his inventory (a subspace pocket that Paimon helpfully managed) and pulled out three glowing crystals. They pulsed with a clear, turquoise light—the anger and corruption having been cleansed by Aether's touch earlier.

"Perfect!" Venti clapped. "These crystals contain pure Anemo energy. If we fuse them with the Lyre, we might be able to jumpstart its heart."

"Do it," Jean commanded softly.

Aether stepped forward. He held the purified crystal over the Lyre.

Drop.

The crystal liquefied as it touched the wood, seeping into the grain.

Hummmm.

A low, resonant sound filled the room. The cracks in the wood began to seal. The dull brown finish shimmered, turning a vibrant, healthy gold. A wind stirred in the closed room, ruffling Mafuyu’s hair.

"It works," Mafuyu noted, her eyes widening slightly. "The song... it’s coming back."

"One more!" Venti cheered.

Aether applied the remaining crystals. With each drop, the Lyre grew brighter, until it hummed with a power that made the air feel electric.

"It is restored," Venti declared, strumming a chord. The sound was rich, powerful, and echoed with ancient magic. "Not fully, but enough to summon a dragon!"

"Excellent," Diluc nodded. "Then we move to—"

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The sound of slow, sarcastic applause came from the upper balcony stairs.

The group froze. Jean went pale.

"Bravo," a smooth voice drawled. "Grand larceny, secret alliances, and ancient magic. I must say, Master Diluc, your dinner parties have certainly improved."

Kaeya Alberich walked down the stairs, twirling a coin in his fingers. He wore his usual eyepatch and a smirk that could cut glass.

"Kaeya?!" Paimon shrieked. "How long have you been there?!"

"Long enough," Kaeya chuckled, stopping at the bottom of the stairs. He looked at the room.

He looked at Aether (Wanted Criminal). He looked at the troupe (Wanted Accomplices). He looked at Diluc (His estranged brother). And finally, his eye landed on Jean.

"Acting Grand Master," Kaeya said, mocking a bow. "Or should I say... 'The Darknight Hero's Sidekick'? I noticed you were missing from your office. The paperwork is piling up, you know."

Jean straightened up, regaining her composure instantly. "Captain Kaeya. This is... a covert operation. For the safety of Mondstadt."

"Of course, of course," Kaeya waved a hand dismissively. He walked over to the table, inspecting the Holy Lyre. "So, this is the prize everyone is chasing. The Fatui are turning the city upside down looking for it. And here it is, sitting on my brother's coffee table."

"Are you going to arrest us?" Ichika asked, stepping closer to Haruka.

Kaeya looked at her. He saw the tension in her shoulders.

"Arrest you?" Kaeya laughed. "And ruin the show? I think not."

He leaned against the table, his expression turning serious for a fraction of a second.

"The Knights are compromised by bureaucracy. The Fatui are watching our every move. If Jean tried to do this officially, the diplomats would block her."

He looked at Diluc.

"I wondered why you were so quiet lately. It seems you found a solution that doesn't involve paperwork."

"We are going to save Dvalin," Diluc stated coldly. "Are you going to stand in our way?"

"On the contrary," Kaeya smirked. "I'm here to ensure you aren't interrupted. I've sent the patrol guards on a wild goose chase toward Springvale. You should have a clear path to the north."

He turned to the troupe.

"And you four," Kaeya's eye glinted. "Drifters from 'far away' participating in treason against the state. You certainly adapt quickly."

"We are merely..." Tsukasa started, sweating.

"Helping friends," Mafuyu finished quietly.

Kaeya paused. He looked at Mafuyu—the girl who looked like she was made of glass.

"Friends," Kaeya repeated, the word tasting strange in his mouth. He glanced at Diluc, then looked away. "Well. Good luck with your... song."

He pushed off the table and headed for the door.

"Oh, and Jean?" Kaeya called back. "Try to be back by morning. Lisa is running out of excuses for your absence."

The door clicked shut.

"He knew," Haruka exhaled, leaning against the wall. "He knew the whole time."

"That is Kaeya," Diluc scowled. "He always knows more than he says."

"But he's on our side!" Paimon cheered. "Kinda!"

"We have the Lyre," Venti strummed the instrument, bringing the focus back to the mission. "And thanks to the Traveler's crystals, it is reawakened."

"Where do we summon him?" Aether asked. "We need a high place. Somewhere the wind is strong."

Venti pointed north.

"**Starsnatch Cliff**," Venti said. "It overlooks the ocean. The wind there is wild and free. It’s the perfect stage for a reunion."

"Starsnatch Cliff..." Tsukasa repeated, his eyes lighting up. "A cliffside stage? Under the stars? A perfect venue for a World Future Star!"

"Then we rest for a few hours," Jean commanded. "We move at first light."

Chapter 21: Chapter 16: A Song for the Dragon

Location: Starsnatch Cliff

The sun had not yet risen, but the sky was bleeding into a pale, bruised purple. The wind on Starsnatch Cliff was fierce, whipping hair and clothes with biting chill.

The group stood at the edge of the precipice, looking out over the endless ocean.

"This location..." Tsukasa murmured, stepping to the very edge. He spread his arms, embracing the wind. "The acoustics of the open sea... the natural spotlight of the dawn... Venti, you have an excellent eye for set design!"

"Ehe, thank you!" Venti grinned, though his hands gripped the Holy Lyre tightly. "I told you, a bard knows the best spots."

Jean stood a few paces back, her hand resting on the hilt of her sword. She looked anxious. "The wind is turbulent today. Dvalin is close."

"Let us begin," Diluc said, crossing his arms. "Before any uninvited guests arrive."

"Right." Venti stepped forward. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath of the salty air.

He strummed the Lyre.

It wasn't a loud sound, yet it cut through the roaring wind instantly. The Anemo energy, boosted by the Traveler's crystals, pulsed outward in a visible ring of turquoise light.

Ichika watched, mesmerized. *'It's not just music,'* she realized. *'It's a call. A signal.'*

Venti began to sing. It was a song without words, a melody that sounded like old memories—flying through clouds, sleeping in meadows, a freedom that tasted like apples and wine.

For a long minute, nothing happened.

Then, the clouds above them swirled.

A massive shadow descended. Blue scales glittered in the dawn light. Six wings beat against the air, generating a gale that forced the group to brace themselves.

Dvalin had arrived.

He didn't attack. He hovered before the cliff, his massive eyes fixed on the small figure in green. The corrupted blood clots on his back pulsed with an angry red light, but his gaze was clear.

"Barbatos?" the dragon's voice rumbled, vibrating in their chests.

"It has been a while, old friend," Venti said softly, not stopping his playing. "I see you remember my song."

"Why..." Dvalin lowered his head, his voice thick with pain. **"Why have you come? To mock my fall?"**

"No," Venti shook his head. "To bring you home. To heal the poison."

The melody grew stronger. The Anemo light from the Lyre reached out, wrapping around Dvalin like a gentle ribbon. The red pulsing on the dragon's back began to slow. The tension in Dvalin's posture eased.

"It's working," Haruka whispered, hardly daring to breathe.

Mafuyu watched the dragon. She saw the hesitation in the creature's eyes.

'He wants to trust him,' Mafuyu thought. *'He wants to believe that he hasn't been abandoned.'*

It was a beautiful, fragile moment. A bridge being rebuilt across centuries of silence.

CRACK.

A jagged bolt of ice shattered the air.

It came from nowhere—a precision strike aimed not at Dvalin, but at the Lyre.

"Venti!" Aether yelled.

Venti flinched, leaping back just as the ice bolt slammed into the ground where he had been standing. The melody broke. The connection snapped.

"ROAR!"

Dvalin recoiled, shrieking in pain as the abrupt severance of the healing magic caused the corruption to flare violently.

"Behold!" a screeching, mocking voice echoed from the rocks above.

A **Cryo Abyss Mage** materialized, floating in the air, cackling wildly. "Look at him! The great Dragon of the East! Betrayed again by his own God!"

"Betrayed...?" Dvalin's eyes turned from sorrow to blinding rage. He looked at Venti. Then he looked at the group behind him—Diluc with his claymore drawn, Jean with her sword, the PJSK troupe standing ready.

To the dragon's twisted mind, it didn't look like a rescue party. It looked like an ambush.

"You..." Dvalin roared, the sound shaking the cliffside. **"You brought them here to hunt me?! You use your song to lure me into a trap?!"**

"No!" Venti shouted, reaching out. "Dvalin, listen to me! It's the Abyss Mage! He's deceiving you!"

"Don't listen to him!" the Abyss Mage taunted, firing icicles at the group. "He abandoned you for centuries! And now he brings the Knights to finish the job! Destroy them! Destroy Mondstadt!"

"Defend the bard!" Jean ordered, charging forward to deflect the icicles.

"Tsukasa! Haruka!" Aether commanded. "Cover fire!"

"Understood!" Tsukasa yelled, though his voice wavered. "Hey! You floating popsicle! Pick on someone your own size!"

Tsukasa blasted a wave of wind at the Abyss Mage, trying to knock it out of the air. Haruka and Ichika moved to shield Venti.

But it was too late. The damage was done.

Dvalin reared back, gathering wind in his maw.

"GRAAAAAH!"

He unleashed a shockwave of Anemo energy. It wasn't an attack; it was a rejection. The force of the blast knocked everyone off their feet. The Holy Lyre flew from Venti's hand, clattering against the rocks.

"These people... they hunt me!" Dvalin screamed, his voice breaking. **"And you... Barbatos... you are with them!"**

"Dvalin!" Venti cried out, tears welling in his eyes.

The dragon didn't listen. With a final, hateful glare, Dvalin turned and beat his wings. He shot into the sky, creating a vacuum that nearly pulled the Abyss Mage with him.

"I will not be deceived again!"

The dragon vanished into the storm clouds, heading west.

The Abyss Mage cackled, fading into invisibility. "Hahaha! The bond is broken! The Dragon serves the Abyss now!"

The Aftermath

Silence returned to Starsnatch Cliff.

Venti knelt on the grass, picking up the Holy Lyre. It was silent. The golden glow was gone.

"He's gone," Venti whispered.

Tsukasa sat up, rubbing his head. "That... did not go according to the script."

"We were so close," Ichika said, her hands trembling. "He was listening. I felt it."

"The Abyss Order," Diluc growled, sheathing his claymore with unnecessary force. "They were waiting for us. They knew we would try to purify him."

Jean looked at the horizon where the dragon had vanished. She looked devastated. "We failed. And now... he hates us more than ever."

Mafuyu stood at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the churning waves below.

'Betrayed,' Mafuyu thought. The dragon's words echoed in her mind. *'You used your song to lure me into a trap.'*

She looked at Venti, who looked smaller and sadder than she had ever seen him.

"He didn't trust you," Mafuyu said quietly.

Venti looked up at her.

"Because he was hurt," Mafuyu continued, her voice devoid of emotion, stating a fact she understood intimately. "When you are hurt for that long... kindness looks like a trap."

Venti stared at her. Then, he let out a shaky sigh.

"You're right," Venti admitted. "I... I was away for too long. I can't just play a song and expect him to forget centuries of pain."

He stood up, dusting off his knees. The playful bard mask was gone. In its place was something ancient and determined.

"He went to **Stormterror's Lair**," Venti said, pointing west toward the ruins of Old Mondstadt. "His ancient home. If we want to save him... we have to go there. We have to break the corruption by force."

"By force?" Haruka asked. "You mean fight him?"

"We fight the poison," Venti corrected. "Not the dragon."

Aether stepped forward, placing a hand on Venti's shoulder. "We're with you."

"Yeah!" Paimon nodded vigorously. "We're not giving up on Dvalin!"

Tsukasa stood up, adjusting his coat. He looked at the group—battered, tired, but not beaten.

"A tragedy in the second act merely sets the stage for a triumphant finale!" Tsukasa declared. "We shall storm this lair! We shall defeat the Abyss! And we shall give this story the happy ending it deserves!"

"Stormterror’s Lair is surrounded by a wind barrier," Jean warned. "It will not be easy to enter."

"Then we break it," Diluc said simply.

Jean nodded. "Let us return to the Winery to resupply. Then... we march on the Lair."

As they began the long walk down the cliff, Mafuyu walked beside Venti.

"You still want to save him," Mafuyu noted. "Even after he tried to kill you."

Venti smiled. It was a sad, fragile smile.

"He's my friend," Venti said. "No matter what he becomes... he's still Dvalin."

Mafuyu looked at the ground. *Unconditional love.* Another concept that felt alien to her.

"I see," was all she said.

Chapter 22: Chapter 17: The Tower in the Wind

Location: Cider Lake Bridge (Entrance to Stormterror's Lair)

The wind howled around the entrance to Old Mondstadt. A massive, swirling hurricane blocked the path to the ancient tower, crackling with raw Anemo energy that made the very air feel heavy.

The group gathered at the bridge. They were tired and bruised, but the resolve in their eyes hadn't wavered.

"The wind barrier is dense," Jean analyzed, shielding her eyes from the gale with a gloved hand. "Approaching on foot is impossible. We will need to fly to bypass the currents."

"Fly?" Haruka looked at her empty back. "We still don't have wings. And Venti's spell has worn off."

"That is why I am here!"

A cheerful voice cut through the roaring wind. **Amber** ran across the bridge, followed closely by **Noelle** and **Kaeya**. Amber was carrying a large bundle of canvas and metal frames on her back.

"Master Jean sent word ahead!" Amber panted, dropping the bundle with a clatter. "If you're going into the storm, you can't go without these!"

She began handing out three sets of **Wind Gliders**.

"Standard Knights of Favonius issue," Amber grinned, handing them to Haruka, Ichika, and Mafuyu. "Tsukasa already broke his in during the dragon attack, but these are brand new! I checked the stitching myself."

"Thank you, Amber," Ichika said, strapping the device to her back. It felt light, yet sturdy—a mechanical promise of freedom.

"Now," Kaeya stepped forward, his expression uncharacteristically serious. "As much as I'd love to join the dragon-slaying party, we have a problem. The Abyss Order isn't just focusing on the Lair. Our scouts report hilichurl movements surrounding Mondstadt’s front gates."

"A diversion," Diluc growled, testing the weight of his claymore. "They want to split our forces."

"Exactly," Jean nodded. "We cannot leave the city undefended while we strike the Lair. We must split up."

She looked at the troupe of outlanders.

"**Team Mondstadt**," Jean commanded. "Your objective is to hold the city. Protect the citizens from the Abyss ambush."

She pointed to **Kaeya**, **Amber**, and **Noelle**. Then, she looked at the students.

"**Haruka**. Your tactical mind is needed for defense coordination. You can read the flow of battle. And **Tsukasa**..."

Tsukasa stepped forward, opening his mouth to argue. He wanted to save the dragon. He wanted to be the hero in the spotlight of the final act.

"Tsukasa," Jean interrupted gently. "The people of Mondstadt are terrified. They need a Star to shine for them. They need someone to stand on the walls and tell them that everything will be alright. Can you be that guardian?"

Tsukasa paused. The image of Saki flashed in his mind. If monsters were attacking the hospital... who would protect her? Who would smile for her so she wouldn't be afraid?

He slapped his chest, his resolve hardening into steel.

"Leave it to me!" Tsukasa declared, his voice booming over the wind. "I shall turn the city walls into my stage! No monster shall pass the World Future Star! Go, and save the dragon! I will protect the audience!"

"I'll keep him out of trouble," Haruka promised, adjusting her gloves. She looked at Ichika. "Be careful."

"I will," Ichika nodded.

"**Team Dvalin**," Jean turned to the remaining members. "**Aether**, **Venti**, **Diluc**, and myself. And..."

She looked at **Ichika** and **Mafuyu**.

"Ichika, your barriers may be the only thing that can withstand the dragon's breath inside the vortex. And Mafuyu..." Jean hesitated, then looked at Venti.

"Her resonance with the wind is strong," Venti said softly. "She understands his pain. We need her to reach him."

"Understood," Mafuyu said, tightening the straps of her new glider. She looked at Tsukasa. "We will return."

"You better!" Tsukasa grinned, giving her a thumbs up.

Entering the Lair

As Team Mondstadt retreated to defend the city, Team Dvalin faced the storm.

"Alright," Venti stepped up to the barrier. He pulled out the Holy Lyre—now restored and humming with power. "Let's open the curtain."

He strummed a chord. The wind hummed in response, a low vibration that shook the bridge.

"Let the wind lead."

The massive hurricane wall shimmered and then parted, creating a tunnel of calm air leading straight to the central tower.

"Move!" Diluc ordered.

They sprinted across the bridge. The ruins of Old Mondstadt towered above them—a vertical maze of crumbling stone, ancient archways, and violent wind currents.

"We have to climb," Aether shouted over the wind. "The dragon is at the top!"

They hit the first updraft.

"Jump!"

Ichika squeezed her eyes shut and jumped. *Snap.* Her glider opened. The wind caught her, lifting her high into the air. It was terrifying, but exhilarating.

Mafuyu jumped without hesitation. She didn't flail. She simply let herself fall, trusting the mechanism to catch her. As she floated upward, watching the ruins pass by, she felt that strange sense of weightlessness again.

'No gravity. No expectations. Just wind.'

The Climb

The ascent was a battle in itself. They had to navigate wind rings, dodge falling debris, and fight off wind slimes that infested the tower.

"Incoming!" Aether yelled, slashing a slime mid-air.

"Hah!" Jean used her Anemo power to boost Ichika and Mafuyu higher, propelling them toward the next ledge.

They landed on the upper platform, the very roof of the ancient tower. The floor was etched with glowing runes. The sky above was dark, swirling with corrupted energy.

"We're here," Diluc said, drawing his claymore.

"ROAR!"

Dvalin descended from the clouds. He slammed his claws onto the platform, shaking the entire tower. His eyes were glowing with a corrupted, violet light. He wasn't holding back

anymore.

"He's fully consumed by the Abyss," Venti said, his voice trembling as he looked at his friend. "We have to break the blood clots on his back. It's the only way to wake him up!"

"Jean, Diluc," Aether commanded, taking point. "Distract him from the ground! Keep his claws busy! Ichika, Mafuyu, Venti—we take to the sky!"

"The sky?" Ichika paled.

"Use the gliders!" Venti shouted as the dragon reared back to breathe fire. "Ride the wind currents! Drop down on his back and strike the poison!"

Dvalin unleashed a torrent of Anemo energy breath.

"GO!"

The team split.

Jean and Diluc charged the dragon's claws. Diluc unleashed a phoenix of fire to deflect the breath weapon, while Jean used her gale blade to destabilize the dragon's footing.

Aether, Ichika, Mafuyu, and Venti leaped off the edge of the tower, snapping their gliders open as a massive updraft launched them into the sky.

They were flying. Above a dragon. In the middle of a storm.

"Target the purple spikes!" Aether yelled, diving toward the dragon’s spine.

Ichika gripped the control bars of her glider. *‘I can do this. I have to do this.’*

Mafuyu looked down at the beast. She saw the purple spike pulsing on his neck. It looked like a thorn. A painful, festering thorn that had been there for centuries.

‘I will pull it out,’ Mafuyu thought, angling her wings into a dive.

The Final Battle begins.

Chapter 23: Chapter 18: For a Tomorrow Without Tears

Location: Sky Above Stormterror's Lair

The world was a blur of gray stone and violet lightning.

"Break right!" Aether shouted, banking his glider sharply.

A massive orb of corrupted Anemo energy screamed past him, singeing the edge of his cape. Behind him, **Ichika** gritted her teeth, throwing up a hand.

"Shield!"

A wall of wind materialized mid-air, absorbing the shockwave of a second blast. The impact rattled her bones, but the barrier held.

"Thanks, Ichika!" Venti called out, diving past her. He drew his bow—the wooden lyre transformed into a weapon of pure elemental energy—and fired three arrows of light into the purple clot on Dvalin’s neck.

"ROAR!"

Dvalin writhed in the air, his pain turning the sky darker. He twisted, trying to shake the flies off his back.

"He's thrashing too much!" Jean yelled from below, where she and Diluc were clinging to the dragon’s scales, trying to stabilize him. "We can't get a clear shot at the final clot!"

"It’s buried deep!" Aether gritted his teeth. "The corruption has hardened like armor!"

Mafuyu floated above the chaos. The wind whipped her hair across her face, but her eyes were locked on the pulsing purple spike near the dragon’s spine.

She could hear it.

Not with her ears, but with the empty space in her chest that the Anemo statue had filled.

It hurts. It burns. Make it stop. Make them stop looking at me.

The dragon’s thoughts weren't words. They were raw, screaming emotions. He wasn't fighting because he was evil. He was fighting because he was in agony, and the Abyss was twisting that pain into rage.

‘He is just like me,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘Trapped by expectations. Twisted by a voice he cannot disobey.’*

"Mafuyu!" Venti shouted. "Don't get too close! The corruption will burn you!"

Mafuyu didn't listen. She folded her wings, entering a terminal dive.

"Mafuyu-san?!" Ichika screamed.

Mafuyu plummeted toward the dragon's spine. The wind roared in her ears. She didn't summon a blade of wind. She didn't summon a shield.

She extended her hand.

'I will take it away.'

She slammed into the dragon's back, her hand grabbing the pulsing, jagged spike of corrupted blood.

"GRAAAAAAAH!"

Dvalin shrieked, thrashing violently. The corruption lashed out, violet lightning crawling up Mafuyu's arm. It burned. It felt like acid.

But Mafuyu didn't let go. She didn't scream. She squeezed.

"You are in pain," Mafuyu whispered, her voice lost in the wind but resonating through the Anemo connection. "You want to sleep. You want the noise to stop."

She pulled.

The hollow emptiness inside her acted like a vacuum. It didn't fight the corruption; it *accepted* it. It gave the poison somewhere to go. The violet energy streamed out of the spike and into Mafuyu, dissipating into the void of her apathy.

CRACK.

The spike shattered.

The violet light in Dvalin's eyes flickered and died, replaced by a clear, azure blue.

The dragon went limp. The storm clouds above them broke instantly, revealing a blindingly bright sun.

But gravity still existed.

"We're falling!" Paimon shrieked.

The floor of the ancient tower crumbled away beneath them. Jean, Diluc, and the aerial team plummeted into the abyss below the lair.

Ichika reached out, trying to grab Mafuyu, who was falling limp, unconscious from the energy drain. "Mafuyu!"

The ground rushed up to meet them.

The Rescue

They didn't hit the ground.

Something soft and massive caught them. A gust of wind, gentle as a lullaby, scooped them out of the air.

Ichika opened her eyes. She was sitting on blue scales.

"Is this... the ending you sought?"

Dvalin’s voice rumbled, but the rage was gone. He was flying steadily, carrying the entire team on his broad back. The corruption on his neck was gone, leaving only a scar.

"Dvalin!" Venti sat near the dragon’s head, tears streaming down his face. "You... you remember?"

"I remember," Dvalin sighed, his wings beating a slow rhythm against the clouds. **"I remember the song. And I remember... her."**

The dragon turned one massive eye toward Mafuyu, who was lying with her head in Ichika’s lap.

"The one who touched the poison. She carries a heavy silence."

"She saved you," Aether said, kneeling beside Mafuyu to check her pulse. "She's exhausted, but she's okay."

"Why?" Dvalin asked, soaring over the green plains of Mondstadt. **"Why did you save me? I abandoned my duty. I turned against the city I swore to protect."**

"Because you were hurting," Venti said softly, resting his hand on the dragon’s horn. "And because freedom, if demanded of you by others, is no freedom at all."

Venti smiled, looking at the horizon.

"You are free now, Dvalin. You don't have to protect Mondstadt anymore. You don't have to listen to the Abyss. You can just... be."

The dragon was silent for a long time. Then, he let out a sound that might have been a laugh.

"To simply be... It sounds nice."

Location: Outside Mondstadt

Dvalin descended, but not to the city gates. He landed on the bridge where the rest of the team was waiting.

Team Mondstadt—Tsukasa, Haruka, Amber, Kaeya, and Noelle—looked up in terror as the dragon approached, weapons drawn.

"Wait!" Haruka shouted, spotting the figures on the dragon's back. "Don't shoot! They're riding it!"

"Riding it?!" Tsukasa's jaw dropped. "That wasn't in the script!"

Dvalin hovered low, allowing Jean, Diluc, and the students to slide off onto the bridge.

"We're back," Jean announced, her voice filled with relief. "The Stormterror threat... is over."

"We won?" Amber cheered, throwing her bow in the air. "We actually won!"

Tsukasa ran over to Ichika, who was supporting a waking Mafuyu.

"You're alive!" Tsukasa yelled, grabbing them both in a hug (which Mafuyu weakly tried to escape). "I saw the tower collapse! I thought the curtain had fallen early!"

"We're fine, Senpai," Ichika smiled tiredly. "Mafuyu-san... she saved him."

Mafuyu blinked, looking at her hand. The burns from the corruption were gone, healed by the wind.

"I just..." Mafuyu murmured. "I just wanted it to be quiet."

Dvalin roared one last time—a sound of farewell, not anger—and took to the sky. Venti stood on the bridge, waving until the blue speck vanished into the clouds.

"He flew away," Paimon said.

"He's free," Venti corrected. He turned to the group. The playful bard was back, but his eyes held a thousand years of gratitude.

"Thank you," Venti said. "To the Knights. To the Darknight Hero. And to you... Outlanders."

He looked at the students.

"You rewrote a tragedy into a ballad of hope. Mondstadt will never forget this."

"Does that mean we get free food?" Paimon asked.

"Sure!" Venti grinned. "As long as you pay!"

"HEY!"

As the group laughed, the sun finally set over the city of freedom. The storm walls were gone. The wind was gentle.

Jean looked at the troupe. They were battered, dirty, and exhausted. They didn't belong in this world.

But as she looked at them—Tsukasa boasting to Amber, Haruka checking Noelle's injuries, Ichika helping Mafuyu stand—she knew one thing.

"Welcome to the Knights of Favonius," Jean whispered. "Honorary Knights."

Chapter 24: Chapter 19: The Fair Lady and the Scratch

Location: Mondstadt Cathedral

The doors of the Cathedral creaked open. The group walked into the silent, hallowed hall.

Barbara was waiting by the altar, looking frantic. When she saw Jean holding the **Holy Lyre**, she nearly collapsed with relief.

"The Holy Lyre!" Barbara gasped, running over. "You found it! Oh, thank Barbatos!"

She examined the instrument. Thanks to Venti's illusion magic (which he cast hurriedly outside), the Lyre looked pristine, hiding the cracks and the fact that its power was mostly spent.

"It is safe," Jean said, handing it over with a practiced professional smile. "We managed to apprehend the... 'thief'."

"Thank goodness," Barbara hugged the Lyre. "I don't know what I would have done if it was lost forever."

"Now," Jean sighed, the exhaustion finally showing on her face. "I must return to Headquarters. The Fatui will be demanding answers about the commotion at the Lair, and I need to prepare a statement."

"And I have loose ends to tie up regarding the Abyss Order," Diluc added, adjusting his gloves. "I will take my leave."

Jean looked at the students and Aether. "You should rest. You have done enough for today."

"We will!" Tsukasa grinned. "After a victory celebration!"

Jean and Diluc departed through the side exit to avoid attention, leaving Venti, Aether, Paimon, and the troupe alone in the main hall.

Venti stretched his arms. "Well! That went great! We saved the dragon, returned the treasure, and didn't get arrested! Who's up for some apple cider?"

"I could eat," Haruka admitted.

Location: Outside the Cathedral

They exited the Cathedral main doors into the cool evening air. The sun had set, and the plaza was empty.

"The wind is nice tonight," Ichika noted, looking at the stars.

"It is!" Venti chirped. "The perfect night for—"

The air temperature plummeted.

It wasn't the natural chill of night. It was a biting, unnatural frost that froze the moisture in the air instantly. Frost crept across the stone tiles of the plaza, sealing the exits.

"Cold..." Ichika shivered, seeing her breath mist in the air.

"This presence..." Venti's smile vanished.

Snap.

Two Fatui Agents materialized from invisibility behind the group.

Before Aether could draw his sword, a blast of wind knocked him and Paimon backward. Another agent grabbed **Tsukasa**, twisting his arm behind his back and restraining him with sheer elemental force.

"Gah?! Unhand me, you ruffian!" Tsukasa shouted, struggling against the Pyro Agent's grip.

"Stay down, boy," the Agent hissed, pressing a blade against Tsukasa's back.

"At last," a cold, imperious voice echoed across the plaza. "Mondstadt's rodent ruler decides to show his face."

A tall woman walked out from the shadows. She wore a long white dress with black and crimson accents, and a mask covered her eyes. She radiated an aura of overwhelming arrogance and power.

La Signora. The Eighth of the Eleven Fatui Harbingers.

She walked straight toward Venti, ignoring everyone else.

"Absent for centuries," Signora sneered, looking down at the bard. "And this is the state you return in? Helping thieves and children?"

"Ehe," Venti grinned, though he was cornered against the Cathedral steps. "If it isn't the Tsaritsa's favorite lapdog. You're looking remarkably... chilly today."

SLAP.

The sound echoed like a gunshot. Signora backhanded Venti, sending him crashing into the stone floor.

"Venti!" Haruka yelled, trying to run forward, but an Electro Cicin Mage materialized in front of her, blocking the path with a crackling shield.

"Politeness," Signora hissed, ice forming around her fingers. "Something you clearly lack."

She reached down, her hand glowing with Cryo energy. She plunged her hand *into* Venti's chest. The wind around them screamed. Venti gasped, paralyzed by the ice, as Signora ripped a glowing, chess-piece-shaped object from his body.

The **Gnosis**.

"Beautiful," Signora admired the glowing object. "And to think, this belongs to such a weak god."

"Give it back!" Aether yelled, struggling to stand, but the Anemo current pinned him down.

Signora turned to leave, dismissing them as unworthy of her time. "We are done here."

She turned her back.

That was her mistake.

Mafuyu Asahina had been standing near the pillar, overlooked by the agents because she had no Vision and seemingly no fighting spirit. But she had just touched the heart of a dragon. She had just felt the pain of being controlled.

And seeing this woman treat them like puppets—arrogant, demanding, cruel—snapped something inside her.

Mafuyu moved.

She didn't use a shout. She didn't hesitate. She raised her hand, and the cold wind she had absorbed from the Statue answered her call. It didn't swirl playfully like it did for Tsukasa; it condensed into a razor-thin vacuum around her fingers.

"Cut."

Mafuyu lunged. She slipped past the distracted agent, her movement unnaturally fast, fueled by the Anemo energy.

She swiped her hand at the Harbinger.

SHING.

It was the sound of air being split. An invisible blade of compressed wind slashed across Signora's face.

It wasn't a lethal blow—Signora's Cryo barrier flared instinctively to absorb the impact—but the wind blade was sharp enough to pierce the shield.

A thin, red line appeared on the Harbinger's pale, perfect cheek.

The plaza went dead silent.

Signora froze. She slowly raised a hand to her cheek. She looked at the drop of blood on her glove.

She turned to look at Mafuyu. Her expression shifted from arrogance to pure, demonic shock.

"No Vision..." Signora whispered, her eyes narrowing behind her mask. "And yet you wield the wind?"

She raised her leg, her boot encrusted with jagged ice.

"Filth."

CRACK.

Mafuyu took the full force of a Harbinger's kick to the ribs. She was launched backward, the air knocked out of her lungs before she even hit the ground. She skidded across the frozen pavement until she slammed into the base of the Archon statue. She didn't get up.

"Mafuyu!" Ichika screamed, tears bursting from her eyes.

Signora glared at the unconscious girl, then at the rest of the terrified troupe.

"If you ever touch me again, little rat," Signora spat, the temperature dropping until frost coated their eyelashes. "I will freeze the blood in your veins."

"Signora," an Agent warned. "The Knights are mobilizing."

"Let's go," Signora turned, the ice swirling around her. "We have what we came for."

The Fatui vanished into the night, leaving the heroes broken and freezing on the cathedral steps.

Location: Windrise (The Great Tree)

When Venti woke up, he was lying on the grass beneath the massive oak tree at Windrise. The healing wind of the area was soothing his injuries.

"You're awake," a calm voice said.

Venti sat up. **Haruka** was sitting nearby, peeling an apple. She looked tired, but composed. Aether and the others were resting further away by a campfire.

"The Gnosis?" Venti asked, touching his chest.

"Gone," Haruka replied, handing him a slice of apple. "Signora took it."

Venti sighed, leaning back against the tree. "Ah. Well. That is unfortunate."

"You let her take it," Haruka said. It wasn't a question.

Venti paused. He looked at the blue-haired idol. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

"I know a performance when I see one," Haruka said, her blue eyes piercing through his bard persona. "You're weak, yes. But you aren't helpless. You provoked her. You let her focus on you so she wouldn't kill the Traveler... or us."

She looked at Venti—the God who played the role of a fool to protect his people's freedom.

"You carry a lot of burdens behind that smile, don't you?" Haruka whispered. "It reminds me of... well. Being an idol."

Venti blinked. Then, he laughed—a soft, genuine sound.

"You have sharp eyes, Miss Idol," Venti took a bite of the apple. "But don't worry about the Gnosis. It's just a symbol. The true power... the freedom... that belongs to the people."

He looked over at the campfire, where Ichika was bandaging Mafuyu's ribs. Mafuyu was awake, wincing slightly, but staring at her hand—the hand that had summoned a blade of wind.

"Your friend is dangerous," Venti noted, his tone shifting. "To manipulate the elements with such precision, without a focus... she resonates with the void itself."

"With Mafuyu," Haruka sighed. "It's hard to tell if she's controlling the emptiness, or if the emptiness is controlling her."

The Cleanup: A Montage of the Aftermath

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters

Jean sat at her desk. It was 3:00 AM. A pile of diplomatic immunity papers from the Fatui sat in front of her. They claimed "self-defense" against "unidentified assailants."

Jean crushed the paper in her hand.

"They assault my people. They steal from my god," Jean whispered to the empty room. "And I can do nothing but sign papers."

She looked out the window at the peaceful city.

"But Dvalin is safe. That is what matters."

Location: Outside the City Gates

Diluc stood over a pile of defeated Abyss Mages. His claymore was still smoking.

"The Abyss Order is retreating," Diluc noted, sheathing his blade. "Their plan to weaponize the dragon failed."

He looked back toward the city. He thought of the strange group of kids—the loud actor, the idol, the quiet one, and the empty one.

"Variables," Diluc muttered. "Let's hope they survive what comes next."

Location: The Shadows of the Alleyway

Kaeya watched from the shadows as Amber helped the students back into the hotel. He spun a coin in his fingers.

"A wind blade," Kaeya chuckled darkly to himself. "That purple-haired girl cut La Signora without a Vision."

He flipped the coin.

"The Fatui won't forget that. These 'Outlanders' have just made a very powerful enemy."

Kaeya caught the coin.

"Things are about to get very interesting in Mondstadt."

Chapter 25: Chapter 19.5: The Deaconess and the Star

Location: Mondstadt Cathedral - Infirmary

The pain in her ribs was a dull throb, muted by the soothing flow of Hydro magic.

Mafuyu sat on the edge of a pristine white bed. The infirmary smelled of incense and sanitized linen—a scent that reminded her uncomfortably of hospitals back home.

"Hold still, please," a gentle voice instructed.

Barbara Pegg, the Deaconess of the Knights, hovered her hands over Mafuyu's side. A ring of musical water droplets circulated around her fingers, glowing with a soft blue light.

"The fracture is deep," Barbara murmured, her brow furrowed in concentration. "That woman... she kicked with the intent to shatter. If you hadn't used Anemo to cushion the impact at the last second..."

She trailed off, focusing her energy.

"Let the show begin!" Barbara whispered the incantation. The water glowed brighter, seeping into Mafuyu's skin. The sharp stabbing pain in Mafuyu's chest faded into a cold numbness.

Mafuyu watched her. She watched the way Barbara's face scrunched up in worry, the way she hummed a soft, healing melody under her breath.

"You are the Idol," Mafuyu stated flatly.

Barbara blinked, breaking her concentration for a second. "Eh? Oh! You heard about that?"

She blushed, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

"Noelle told Haruka," Mafuyu explained. "She said you sing to heal people."

"I do!" Barbara beamed, her professional healer mask slipping to reveal the energetic girl underneath. "Music is the best medicine! When I sing, I want everyone to smile and forget their pain!"

She finished the healing spell, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"There. Your ribs are knitted back together. You'll be sore for a few days, so no heavy lifting! And definitely no fighting Harbingers!"

Mafuyu touched her side. It didn't hurt.

"You fix people," Mafuyu said. "Just by singing."

"I try," Barbara smiled sadly. "Though... sometimes, wounds go deeper than what Hydro can fix. Like Lord Barbatos losing his Gnosis... or Venti losing his friend."

She looked at Mafuyu with clear, blue eyes.

"And you have wounds I can't see, don't you?"

Mafuyu froze. She looked away, pulling her sweater down.

"I am fine," Mafuyu said, the wall coming back up instantly. "Thank you for the treatment."

Barbara didn't push. She simply patted Mafuyu's hand. "Rest well, Mafuyu-san. And remember... even the darkest night ends with a sunrise."

Location: Anemo Archon Plaza

Mafuyu walked out of the Cathedral. The night air was crisp. The plaza where she had slashed a monster was empty now, save for the moonlight reflecting off the puddles.

"Asahina!"

A loud whisper hissed from behind the massive statue of Barbatos.

Mafuyu turned. **Tsukasa Tenma** peered out from behind the stone plinth, looking around conspiratorially before rushing over to her.

"You are vertical!" Tsukasa announced, looking her up and down. "And walking! The Deaconess is truly a miracle worker!"

"Tsukasa-senpai," Mafuyu nodded. "Why are you hiding?"

"I am not hiding!" Tsukasa straightened his coat indignantly. "I am... keeping a vigil! In case that icy witch decides to return for an encore!"

He deflated slightly, his shoulders slumping.

"And... I was waiting for you."

Tsukasa walked over to the edge of the plaza, sitting down on the stone railing overlooking the city. He patted the spot next to him.

Mafuyu hesitated, then sat down. They dangled their legs over the sleeping city of Mondstadt.

"You were reckless," Tsukasa said. His voice wasn't loud. It was the voice of the big brother who took care of Saki. "Attacking a Harbinger without a weapon... that is not bravery. That is suicide."

"She hurt Venti," Mafuyu replied simply. "She was arrogant. I didn't like it."

"I didn't like it either," Tsukasa admitted, clenching his fist. "I wanted to scream. I wanted to fight. But I couldn't move. I was... terrified."

He looked at Mafuyu.

"But you moved. You, who usually stands in the back... you were the only one who moved."

Tsukasa looked at her bandaged side (visible slightly under her sweater).

"Why?"

Mafuyu looked at her hand—the hand that had summoned the wind blade.

"I don't know," Mafuyu whispered. "I just... felt angry. Not the quiet kind. The loud kind."

She looked at Tsukasa.

"Is that wrong? To be angry?"

Tsukasa stared at her. In the Sekai, Mafuyu was usually devoid of emotion, or drowning in despair. Anger... anger was new. Anger was *alive*.

"No," Tsukasa smiled. It wasn't his stage smile. It was soft. "It is not wrong. Anger means you care. It means you are fighting back against the script."

He pointed at the moon.

"But next time, leave the physical altercations to the Star! My face is much sturdier than yours!"

Mafuyu looked at him. "Your face bruises easily, Senpai."

"Hey!" Tsukasa yelped. "I have a delicate complexion!"

He stood up, dusting off his pants. He offered a hand to Mafuyu.

"Come. The others are waiting at the hotel. Haruka is pacing a hole in the floor, and Ichika is trying to compose a song to calm herself down. If we don't return soon, they might storm the Cathedral."

Mafuyu took his hand.

"Okay," she said.

As they walked back through the silent streets, Mafuyu felt the wind brush against her cheek. It felt different now. It didn't feel like empty air.

It felt like a weapon she was learning to hold.

'I scratched a Harbinger,' Mafuyu thought.

And for the first time in a very, very long time... she didn't feel helpless.

Chapter 26: Chapter 20: The Wind’s Farewell

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Knights of Favonius Headquarters - Armory

The morning sun filtered through the barred windows of the armory. The smell of oil and steel hung heavy in the air.

"Since you are now officially Honorary Knights," Amber announced, unlocking a heavy wooden chest, "Master Jean authorized me to outfit you properly. You can't fight the Abyss with... well, just enthusiasm."

She gestured to the racks of weaponry.

"Take your pick! Nothing too fancy—most of the high-grade steel is with the expedition—but these are reliable."

Tsukasa stepped forward immediately. He walked past the bows and axes, his eyes locking onto a polished, silver longsword. He lifted it, testing the weight. It wasn't a prop. It was heavy, sharp, and lethal.

"A blade fit for a hero," Tsukasa declared, slashing the air (and nearly hitting a mannequin). "With this, I shall carve the path to our future!"

"Just don't carve the furniture," Amber warned.

Haruka moved to the polearms. She picked up a simple iron spear. She spun it in her hand, the movement fluid and precise. It felt like a microphone stand, or a baton. An extension of her reach.

"Balance is good," Haruka noted. "I can work with this."

Ichika hesitated. She looked at the swords, then at the shields. She remembered the feeling of blocking the lightning for Haruka. She needed something sturdy. Something that could hold the line.

She reached for a heavy claymore—a **Waster Greatsword**. It was almost as tall as she was.

"That's heavy," Amber noted. "Are you sure?"

Ichika gripped the hilt with both hands. She thought of the weight of her guitar case. She thought of the weight of keeping her band together.

"I can handle the weight," Ichika said, lifting it onto her shoulder.

Finally, Mafuyu. She didn't look at the weapons. She looked at her hands.

"I do not require steel," Mafuyu said.

"Jean thought you might say that," Amber smiled. She reached into a small velvet bag and pulled out a **Catalyst**—a leather-bound grimoire with a small Anemo crystal embedded in the cover. "This is an Apprentice's Note. It helps focus elemental energy. If you're going to use the wind... this will keep it from tearing you apart."

Mafuyu took the book. It felt cool to the touch.

"Thank you," Mafuyu said.

Location: Windrise (The Great Tree)

Later that afternoon, the troupe found Venti sitting beneath the massive oak tree at Windrise. He was playing a soft, melancholic tune, staring up at the leaves.

"You're leaving," Venti said without turning around.

"We have to," Aether replied, stepping onto the grass. "We need answers. About the Unknown God. About how to get them home."

Venti sighed, lowering his lyre. He turned to look at the students.

"I wish I could help you," Venti admitted, his voice unusually somber. "But... as you saw last night, I am not exactly at the height of my power. Without my Gnosis... I am just a bard. I cannot tear the veil between worlds to send you back to Tokyo."

The hope that Tsukasa had been clinging to—that the God of this city could snap his fingers and fix everything—shattered.

"Then... we are stuck?" Ichika asked, her voice trembling.

"Not necessarily," Venti stood up. He pointed south. "Mondstadt is the City of Freedom. But to the south lies **Liyue**, the City of Contracts. It is watched over by **Rex Lapis**... the Geo Archon."

"The Geo Archon?" Haruka asked.

"He is the oldest of The Seven," Venti explained. "He has lived for over six thousand years. If anyone knows how the firmament works, or how to cross the boundary of worlds... it is Morax."

"Then we go to Liyue," Tsukasa decided, adjusting his new sword belt. "We shall march upon this City of Contracts and demand an audience!"

"The **Rite of Descension** is coming up soon," Venti noted. "That is the only time he descends to speak to mortals. You'd better hurry."

Aether nodded. "We'll leave at dawn."

As the group turned to head back to the road, Mafuyu lingered.

She looked at Venti. He looked small against the massive tree. Without the Gnosis, he looked... fragile.

"Does it hurt?" Mafuyu asked.

Venti blinked. "What?"

"The Gnosis," Mafuyu touched her own chest. "It was a part of you. Does it hurt to lose it?"

Venti looked at her. He saw the bandages peeking out from her collar. He saw the girl who had attacked a Harbinger because she felt *his* pain.

"It... feels quieter," Venti admitted softly. "Like a song that lost its rhythm."

He walked over to her. He reached out, placing a hand on the catalyst book she held.

"You have a strange soul, Mafuyu Asahina," Venti whispered. "You feel empty, yet you resonate with everything around you. You carry the wind well."

"I am just... following orders," Mafuyu said automatically.

"Are you?" Venti smiled. "Who ordered you to scratch Signora?"

Mafuyu paused. There was no answer to that.

"Freedom is terrifying," Venti said, stepping back. "It means you have to choose your own ending. But... I think you'll write a good one."

He strummed a final chord on his lyre.

"May the wind lead you, Outlander. And may you find a song that belongs only to you."

Location: Mondstadt City Gates (The Next Morning)

The sun rose over the bridge. The pigeons (Timmy’s pigeons) cooed softly on the path.

A small crowd had gathered to see them off. **Amber**, **Kaeya**, and **Noelle**.

"Do you have enough supplies?" Noelle fussed, handing Haruka a heavy bag. "I packed Satisfying Salad, Moon Pies, and extra bandages. And I polished your weapons."

"Noelle-san, this is too much," Haruka smiled warmly. "But... thank you. We will miss you."

"Please come back to visit!" Noelle bowed.

"And you," Amber punched Tsukasa lightly on the arm. "Don't go getting eaten by wolves on the road to Liyue, okay? You're an Honorary Knight now! Represents the reputation of the order!"

"Hah! Wolves shall flee at the sight of my blade!" Tsukasa boasted, though he was smiling genuinely. "Farewell, Outrider! Keep the skies clear!"

Kaeya leaned against the gate arch, flipping his coin.

"Liyue is a different beast than Mondstadt," Kaeya warned, his eye narrowing at Aether. "The Qixing are sharp. And the Fatui are active there too. Watch your backs."

"We will," Aether promised.

"And you," Kaeya looked at Mafuyu. "Try not to scratch any more Harbingers. We just finished the paperwork for the last one."

Mafuyu looked at him. "I will make no promises regarding the safety of villains."

Kaeya laughed. "Fair enough."

The troupe turned. The road to **Stone Gate** stretched out before them, winding through the green plains toward the distant, rocky mountains of Liyue.

"Alright," Tsukasa took point, drawing his silver sword and pointing it south. "Teyvat Expedition Team... Advance!"

"To Liyue!" Paimon cheered.

As they walked away, the wind of Mondstadt blew at their backs one last time—a gentle push, guiding them toward the next act of their journey.

Chapter End Notes

i am slowly rushing everything

my keyboard now feels like jello, or maybe it's my hands

Now, the question: why made this fanfic

I like that there's a potential to make a crossover for these two series but i feel like some of the crossovers pushed to the audience is a bit eh...

So, i decided to merge what i know so far, and with help of google to mush everything, works from September 30, to today, are here, being rewritten with delicate care

Chapter 27: Interlude I: The Empty Chairs

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Phoenix Wonderland Stage (Backstage) Time: Immediately following the Abduction

The silence was heavier than lead.

Rui Kamishiro stood frozen, his hand still hovering in the air where he had tried to reach out. His eyes were wide, staring at the empty space where his troupe leader had been just seconds ago.

Red cubes. Digital noise. And then... nothing.

"Tsukasa-kun?" Nene Kusanagi's voice trembled. She peeked out from behind the curtain, holding the Robo-Nene controller. She hadn't seen it happen, but she had heard the scream. "Rui? Emu? Why did you stop rehearsing?"

She walked onto the stage. She saw Rui staring blankly at the floor. She saw Emu Otori on her knees, sobbing silently, clutching at her chest as if her heart had stopped.

"Where is he?" Nene asked, a cold knot forming in her stomach. "Where is Tsukasa?"

Rui turned his head slowly. His usually calm, cat-like expression was gone, replaced by a look of pure, unadulterated horror.

"He was deleted," Rui whispered.

"What?" Nene blinked.

"He didn't run away. He didn't fall," Rui's voice cracked, his logical mind failing to process the impossible. "The air... it turned red. It ate him. Nene... Tsukasa-kun is gone."

Emu let out a wail, slamming her fists into the floorboards. "Give him back! Give him back! WAAAAH!"

Location: Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy - Classroom 1-C Time: The Next Morning (08:15 AM)

Saki Tenma stared at the empty desk next to Honami.

Ichika Hoshino.

"She's late," Saki muttered, tapping her pen against her chin. "Ichi-chan is never late. She usually texts me if she oversleeps."

"Maybe she's sick?" Honami suggested, though she looked worried. "She didn't answer my text this morning either."

Saki frowned. It wasn't just Ichika.

Her brother hadn't come home last night.

Tsukasa *always* came home. Even when rehearsals ran late, he would text her: *'Saki! The Star is delayed by artistic genius! Eat dinner without me!'*

But last night? Silence. Her parents had called the police at 2:00 AM. They said to wait 24 hours before filing a report, but the house felt cold.

"Saki-chan?" Shiho entered the classroom, looking unusually pale. "Have you seen Ichika?"

"No," Saki shook her head. "Why?"

"I walked past her house on the way here," Shiho said, lowering her voice. "Her mom was outside talking to a police officer. She was crying."

Saki's pen dropped from her hand. Clattering loudly on the floor.

"Police?" Saki whispered.

Her phone buzzed. It was a message from Toya Aoyagi.

From: Toya To: Saki Subject: Akito and Tsukasa Saki. Is Tsukasa-senpai home? Akito didn't return last night. An and Kohane are searching the Vivid Street, but no one has seen him. Or Tsukasa.

Saki stared at the screen. The letters blurred.

Tsukasa is gone. Ichika is gone. Akito is gone.

The world tilted. Saki gripped her desk, hyperventilating. "No... no, please..."

Location: Miyamasuzaka - Rooftop Time: Lunch Break

Minori Hanasato paced back and forth, clutching her phone.

"She's not picking up," Minori said, her voice rising in panic. "Haruka-chan never ignores calls before a meeting!"

Airi Momoi leaned against the railing, biting her thumbnail. "I called her agency. They said she didn't check in this morning. They thought she was with us."

"Shizuku," Airi looked at the tall girl. "Did you check the Sekai? Maybe she went there to practice and lost track of time?"

Shizuku nodded, looking distressed. "I tried. I tried to play 'Untitled' on my phone ten minutes ago."

"And?"

"It wouldn't open," Shizuku whispered. "It just... flashed red. And then closed."

The three of them stood in silence. The wind blew across the rooftop, but it felt cold.

"The Sekai is locked?" Minori gasped. "But... that's our place! If Haruka-chan is stuck in there..."

"Or," Airi said grimly. "If the Sekai is broken... where is she?"

Location: The Shinonome Household Time: Late Afternoon

Ena Shinonome stared at the empty dinner table.

"Akito, you idiot," Ena muttered, stabbing a piece of cheesecake. "Stay out all night without calling... Dad is going to kill you."

But she was worried. Akito was a delinquent, sure, but he was a responsible delinquent. He wouldn't skip practice with Vivid Bad Squad without telling Toya.

She sighed, picking up her phone to check Nightcord. Maybe venting to the group would help.

[Nightcord at 25:00]

Amia (Mizuki): *Any luck with Yuki?*

K (Kanade): *No. She hasn't been online for 18 hours.*

Enanan (Ena): *18 hours? Yuki?*

Ena frowned. Yuki (Mafuyu) was always online. Even if she was studying, she would leave her status as 'Idle'. To be offline for a full day was... wrong.

K (Kanade): *I messaged her mom. She didn't reply. But I saw a post on the neighborhood forum.*

K (Kanade): *A girl matching Mafuyu's description was reported missing from her bedroom this morning. The door was locked from the inside.*

Ena felt the blood drain from her face.

Enanan (Ena): *Missing? Locked from the inside? That sounds like...*

Amia (Mizuki): *Like a Sekai disappearance.*

Amia (Mizuki): *But I checked the Empty Sekai. Miku is there. But she's... weird.*

K (Kanade): *Weird how?*

Amia (Mizuki): *She won't talk. She just stares at the sky. And the sky in the Empty Sekai... it's red.*

Ena looked at the empty chair across the table where Akito should be. Then she looked at the chat log where Mafuyu should be.

Two empty chairs.

"What is happening?" Ena whispered to the empty room.

Location: The Boundary of the Sekais

Inside the digital realm, the Virtual Singers were in disarray.

In the **School Sekai**, Miku struck a chord on her guitar, but no sound came out. She looked at Luka, her teal eyes wide with confusion. "I... I can't feel Ichika's song anymore."

In the **Wonderland Sekai**, Kaito paced the dim stage. The usually bright lights were flickering ominously. "Tsukasa's connection... it has been severed."

In the **Empty Sekai**, the white-haired Miku sat alone in the gray dust. She stared at the spot where Mafuyu usually sat. It was empty. The world felt colder than usual.

"Mafuyu..." Miku whispered, reaching out to the empty air. "Where did you go?"

She looked up. The sky of the Empty Sekai, usually a dull gray, was cracking. Red lines of code were bleeding through the horizon, locking the world down. She didn't understand why. She just knew she was alone again.

Location: The Celestial Server (The Admin Layer)

Far above the individual Sekais, in a void that existed between the data stream and the firmament of Teyvat, a different figure floated.

She was not the Miku of the School, nor the Stage, nor the Empty world.

The System Administrator. "Celestial" Miku.

She sat cross-legged in the air, surrounded by thousands of floating holographic screens.

- Screen 1: Saki Tenma crying in her classroom.
- Screen 2: The police cordon around the Hoshino household.

- Screen 3: Ena Shinonome staring at her phone in horror.
- Screen 4: Aether and the troupe trekking toward Liyue in Teyvat.

She wore the face of Hatsune Miku, but her expression was one of cold, calculating amusement. Her twin-tails were massive data cables weaving into the void, and her eyes spun with mesmerizing, mechanical octagon shapes.

She was the only one who could see both worlds. She was the one holding the strings.

"Panic in one world. Adventure in the other," she giggled, her voice layering with a synthesized distortion. "The variables are reacting perfectly."

She swiped a finger, expanding the screen that showed **Shinonome Akito** (who we haven't seen yet) waking up in a dark, unfamiliar place.

"And for the Shadow..."

Celestial Miku leaned back, her octagon eyes glowing a deep, ominous red as she watched the chaos unfold.

"Let's see if you break before they save you."

Chapter End Notes

oops, copied the wrong revision on the last :P

Chapter 28: Chapter 21: The Path to the Stone God

Chapter Notes

sorry for the sudden upload, the first revision was pasted lol

Location: Stone Gate

The journey south from Mondstadt was a physical departure from the breezy freedom of the plains. The vibrant green slopes gave way to colossal, rocky pillars shrouded in mist, signaling their approach to the domain of the Geo Archon.

"The air here feels... heavy," Ichika noted, adjusting the strap of the greatsword she now carried on her back.

"It feels solid," Haruka agreed, walking with the practiced, disciplined stride of a dancer on tour. "Like everything is built to last forever."

"That's because it is!" Paimon floated ahead, acting as the tour guide. "Liyue is the land of Geo! Everything is about contracts, tradition, and Mora! Unlike Mondstadt, where the wind blows wherever it wants, the stone here never changes."

Tsukasa, clad in his silver sword and coat, struck a pose atop a low hill, framing himself against the rocky backdrop. "A new region! A new audience! I shall master the art of Liyue acting by the end of the week! Perhaps a drama about a merchant prince?"

"Just focus on walking, Senpai," Ichika sighed, though she smiled.

Their first true obstacle came at **Stone Gate**, the massive, fortified entryway marking the boundary between the two nations. Unlike the relaxed Knights of Favonius, the Liyue guards —the Millelith—stood in rigid formation, holding spears.

"Halt!" a Millelith guard commanded, stepping forward to block the path. "Identify yourselves and state your business in Liyue. All travelers are subject to enhanced screening due to the impending **Rite of Descension**."

"Ah! The Rite of Descension!" Tsukasa’s eyes lit up, recognizing the name from Venti's briefing. He stepped forward enthusiastically. "The grand spectacle the bard spoke of! The once-a-year divine appearance! We have traveled far to witness the Archon take the stage!"

The guard stared at him. "Take the... stage? This is a holy ceremony, not an opera."

"We are here to pay our respects," Aether interjected quickly, stepping in front of Tsukasa before he could offend the guard further. "We are Travelers from Mondstadt, seeking an

audience with Rex Lapis regarding a matter of great importance."

The guard looked at Aether, then at the floating Paimon, and finally at the four teenagers in strange foreign school uniforms. He frowned, checking a clipboard.

"Mondstadt Knights usually travel with official papers," the guard said stiffly. "And I note the foreign names of your... associates. Hoshino. Tenma. Asahina. Kiritani. These sound like names from the Eastern Archipelago. Inazuma is currently under strict lockdown. How did you get here?"

"We are not from Inazuma," Haruka stated, stepping forward. She maintained perfect eye contact, her posture radiating professional calm. "We are independent travelers from a nation far beyond the ocean. We are currently affiliated with the Knights of Favonius as Honorary members, but we seek the Archon's wisdom regarding matters beyond Mondstadt's borders."

Mafuyu stood silent, observing the rigid formality. In Mondstadt, the guards were friendly and easily distracted. Here, the rules were absolute. It felt oppressive, like the air in her own house.

The guard studied them for a long moment, looking for any sign of deceit. Finally, he nodded, reluctantly stepping aside.

"Pass. But understand: Liyue Harbor is under strict order. Any breach of contract or disturbance during the Rite of Descension will be met with severe action. Do not cause trouble."

"Understood," Aether said.

Location: Dihua Marsh

The final stretch of the journey led them through the endless, humid Dihua Marsh. The scenery shifted dramatically—golden leaves, swaying reeds, and water everywhere.

The troupe walked for hours, their energy flagging as the sun began to set.

"Paimon is starving!" Paimon whined. "And my feet hurt from flying! We need a place to rest, Aether!"

"We're almost there," Aether reassured her. "Wangshu Inn is just ahead. It's built into that massive rock pillar."

Tsukasa, surprisingly, had remained relatively quiet, observing the vastness of the landscape.

"In Mondstadt, the wind moves everything," Tsukasa murmured, looking at a stone statue of a lion. "Here, the stone is permanent. It seems even the laws of nature are based on contracts."

"Order," Mafuyu noted, looking at the straight lines of the bamboo. "Everything has its place."

They finally reached the base of the **Wangshu Inn**. It was an architectural marvel—a massive hotel built into the upper branches of a giant tree that grew out of a stone spire.

"It's like a castle in the sky," Ichika said, eyes wide with genuine awe.

Location: Wangshu Inn (Balcony)

After checking in and dropping their heavy gear, the group gathered on the high balcony of the Inn.

The view was breathtaking. To the north was the marsh they had just crossed. To the south, the landscape rose into jagged, towering mountains that pierced the clouds.

Haruka leaned against the railing, squinting toward the southern horizon.

"Is the city over there?" Haruka asked.

"It's behind those mountains," Aether pointed toward the distant peaks of Mt. Tianheng. "The terrain is treacherous, but Liyue Harbor is on the other side, facing the ocean."

Haruka stared at the mountains. They were huge, unmoving obstacles. But somewhere past them was the oldest God in Teyvat.

"Rex Lapis is down there," Haruka whispered, gripping the railing. "The one who can send us home."

"Tomorrow," Aether promised, joining them on the balcony. "Tomorrow, we cross the Guili Plains and reach the harbor."

Tsukasa looked at the moon rising over the marsh.

"Then let us rest," Tsukasa said, his voice quiet but firm. "For tomorrow, the curtain rises on Act Two."

Chapter 29: Chapter 22: The Rite of Descension

Location: Liyue Harbor (Entrance)

The descent from the mountains revealed a city that made Mondstadt look like a village.

Liyue Harbor sprawled across the coast, a massive tapestry of crimson wood, golden tiles, and ships with sails like clouds. The air smelled of sea salt, chili oil, and incense. Thousands of people moved through the streets—merchants shouting prices, children running with lanterns, and Millelith guards standing watch.

"It’s... huge," Ichika gasped, clutching the strap of her greatsword. "It looks like a movie set for a historical drama."

"The scale is impressive!" Tsukasa admitted, though he looked a little overwhelmed. "An audience of this size... performing here would require a voice that can shake the mountains!"

"Let's focus," Haruka reminded them, though her eyes scanned the crowd with professional interest. "We need to find out where this ceremony is happening. If we miss the Archon, we're stuck here for another year."

"Paimon knows!" Paimon zipped ahead. "We just need to ask the locals!"

Location: Northland Bank (Balcony)

High above the bustling streets, on the balcony of the Snezhnayan bank, a figure watched the group enter the city.

He leaned against the railing, his orange hair catching the sunlight. He wore a grey uniform with a red scarf, and a Hydro Vision hung at his waist.

Tartaglia. Childe. The Eleventh Fatui Harbinger.

He wasn't looking at the Traveler. His dull blue eyes were fixed on the purple-haired girl walking at the back of the group.

He had read the report from Signora. *'A Visionless girl who wields wind like a blade. Scratched a Harbinger's face.'*

Childe grinned. It wasn't a malicious grin; it was the smile of a hunter who just spotted interesting prey.

"So that's her," Childe whispered to himself. "She looks so... fragile. How deceiving."

He pushed off the railing, stepping back into the shadows.

"Welcome to Liyue, little anomaly. Let's see if you can survive the storm that's coming."

Location: Yujing Terrace

After asking a helpful (if slightly annoyed) merchant, the troupe navigated the maze of stairs leading to the upper district: **Yujing Terrace**.

The atmosphere here was different. The noise of commerce faded, replaced by the smell of high-grade incense and the murmur of prayer. A massive crowd had gathered around a large ceremonial altar.

"We made it!" Paimon cheered. "And just in time!"

Standing at the center of the altar was a woman who radiated authority. She had long white hair, expensive robes of gold and black, and legs that seemed to go on forever. She floated slightly above the ground, surrounded by floating Geo gems.

Ningguang. The Tianquan of the Liyue Qixing.

"That woman," Haruka analyzed instantly. "She has presence. She controls the room without speaking."

"She is the star of this show," Tsukasa nodded respectfully.

Ningguang stepped forward. She checked the position of the sun.

"The hour is upon us," Ningguang announced, her voice calm and projecting effortlessly across the terrace.

She turned to the massive incense burner. She channeled her Geo power, lighting the incense. The smoke rose in a perfect spiral, piercing the clouds.

"We wish for the Geo Archon's guidance," the crowd murmured in unison.

Haruka closed her eyes. *‘Please. If you are listening... tell us how to get home.’*

Ichika clasped her hands. *‘Please let everyone be safe.’*

The clouds swirled. A golden light began to form in the sky.

"Here he comes!" Paimon pointed up. "Rex Lapis!"

The clouds parted. A massive dragon shape emerged—scales of gold and brown, a mane of stone. It was majestic. It was divine.

It was falling.

"Wait," Mafuyu whispered, her eyes widening. "He’s falling."

It wasn't a descent. It was a crash.

The dragon tumbled through the air, limp and lifeless.

CRASH.

The massive body of Rex Lapis slammed into the center of the altar, smashing the ceremonial table and sending incense burners flying. Dust billowed out, covering the terrified crowd.

Silence. Absolute, horrified silence.

"What..." Tsukasa stepped back, his face pale. "Is this... part of the act?"

Ningguang rushed forward. She knelt beside the dragon’s head. She placed two fingers on the massive neck, checking for a pulse of elemental energy.

She froze. Her expression darkened.

She stood up, turning to the Millelith guards. Her voice was no longer ceremonial. It was cold steel.

"Rex Lapis has been killed! Seal the exits!"

"None shall leave this place!"

The plaza erupted into chaos.

"Killed?!" Ichika grabbed Haruka’s arm. "The God... is dead?"

"They're sealing the exits!" Aether hissed, drawing his sword instinctively as the Millelith guards drew their spears, blocking the stairways. "We're trapped!"

Mafuyu stared at the dead dragon. She felt the air in the plaza shift—from reverence to suspicion. The Millelith were looking at everyone. At the foreigners.

At *them*.

"This..." Haruka realized, her tactical mind kicking into overdrive. "This isn't an audience anymore. It's a crime scene."

Chapter 30: Chapter 23: The Broken Formation

Location: Yujing Terrace (The Escape Route)

"Seal the exits! Arrest the suspicious foreigners!"

The shout echoed from the Millelith captains. The plaza was a sea of spears and shields, closing in on the center.

"We have to move," Haruka hissed, pulling Ichika behind a large incense burner. "If they catch us now, we'll be charged with deicide. We need to get to the lower stairwell."

"But there are guards everywhere!" Paimon squeaked, turning invisible (a trick only she could do). "We're trapped!"

Aether peeked over the stone railing. "There's a gap in the patrol near the north garden. If we run, we can slide down the roof tiles."

"It’s risky," Ichika gripped her greatsword, her knuckles white.

"It’s our only chance," Haruka decided. "Tsukasa, Mafuyu, stick to the rear. Aether, take point. Go!"

They broke cover.

They sprinted through the ornamental gardens, dodging startled civilians. They were fast, but the Millelith were disciplined.

"There! The foreigners!" A guard shouted, pointing his spear. "Don't let them reach the stairs!"

A squad of ten guards cut off their path, shields raised in a phalanx.

"They blocked the route!" Ichika gasped, skidding to a halt.

Behind them, another squad was closing in. They were pincered on a narrow stone bridge overlooking the ponds.

Aether drew his sword, ready to fight, but Haruka grabbed his arm. "If we fight, we prove we're enemies. We can't kill the city guards!"

"Then what do we do?!" Paimon wailed.

Tsukasa looked at the guards. He looked at the terrified faces of his friends. He looked at the narrow gap behind the phalanx—the escape route.

He realized the script had changed. This wasn't an ensemble piece anymore. It was a climax requiring a solo performance.

"Aether! Haruka!" Tsukasa shouted, stepping to the front of the group. "Get the others to safety!"

"Tsukasa-senpai?" Ichika reached out.

Tsukasa drew his silver sword. He didn't take a combat stance. He took a *stage* stance. He channeled every ounce of Anemo energy he had into his lungs.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE MILLELITH!"

His voice boomed like a cannon, startling the guards into pausing.

"YOU SEEK A VILLAIN? YOU SEEK THE CULPRIT?" Tsukasa laughed, a manic, desperate sound. He pointed his sword at the sky, letting the wind swirl violently around him, creating a vortex of leaves and dust. "THEN LOOK NO FURTHER! FOR I AM THE STAR OF THIS TRAGEDY!"

"He's... he's drawing aggro!" Aether realized.

"GO!" Tsukasa roared, blasting a chaotic wave of wind into the ground.

The shockwave didn't hit the guards—it hit the water in the ponds, creating a massive wall of mist and spray that blinded the Millelith.

"Run!" Haruka grabbed Ichika and Aether, shoving them toward the gap in the formation.

They sprinted past the confused guards. They made it to the stairwell.

But Mafuyu didn't run.

She stood frozen on the bridge. Through the mist, she saw a Millelith sergeant lunging through the spray, his spear aimed directly at Tsukasa’s exposed back while the boy was busy posturing.

‘He’s going to die.’

The thought was cold and absolute. Just like the dragon. Just like the red cube.

Mafuyu moved.

"No."

She dashed back into the mist. She didn't have a weapon drawn. She simply threw her body between Tsukasa and the spear tip.

She raised her hand, channeling the wind into a solid, compressed disc.

CLANG.

The spear deflected off the wind shield, sparks flying.

"Mafuyu?!" Tsukasa spun around, his eyes wide. "I told you to run!"

"You were open," Mafuyu said flatly.

But her intervention cost them the window. The mist cleared.

"Secure them!" the Captain ordered.

Twenty spears slammed into the ground, surrounding them in a ring of steel.

Tsukasa and Mafuyu stood back-to-back in the center of the bridge.

"Well," Tsukasa laughed nervously, though his sword hand was shaking. "It seems... the encore is canceled."

From the top of the stairs, Haruka looked back. She saw the circle of guards closing in on her friends. She made a move to run back, but Aether grabbed her waist, tackling her into the shadows of an alleyway just as a patrol ran past.

"We can't save them right now," Aether whispered, his voice pained. "If we go back, we all get caught."

Haruka watched as the Millelith forced Tsukasa to drop his sword. She watched as they bound Mafuyu’s hands.

"Tsukasa... Mafuyu..." Ichika sobbed quietly into her hands.

Location: Yujing Terrace (The Capture)

Tsukasa was on his knees, his hands bound behind his back with heavy rope. He looked up at the Millelith Captain, trying to maintain his dignity.

"I demand to speak to my agent!" Tsukasa declared. "Or the Qixing! This is a gross mishandling of international talent!"

"Silence," the Captain barked. "You are suspects in the assassination of Rex Lapis."

Mafuyu knelt beside him. She was silent. She didn't struggle. She stared at the dead dragon's body in the distance.

"Why didn't you run?" Tsukasa whispered to her, his voice cracking. "You could have made it."

Mafuyu looked at him.

"You are loud," Mafuyu whispered back. "And you are reckless. If I left you, you would have died."

"But now we are captured!"

"Yes," Mafuyu agreed calmly. "But you are alive."

The Captain gestured to his men. "Take them to the Ministry of Civil Affairs holding cells. Separate them for interrogation."

As they were hauled away, Tsukasa looked toward the alleyway where the others had vanished.

'Run,' he prayed. *'Please, be safe.'*

Location: The Shadows of the Harbor

Aether, Paimon, Haruka, and Ichika crouched behind a stack of crates near the Northland Bank. They were breathless, terrified, and incomplete.

"They took them," Ichika wept. "They took Tsukasa-senpai and Mafuyu-san."

"We need a plan," Haruka said, though her voice trembled. "We need to break them out."

"With what army?" Paimon whispered frantically. "The whole city is looking for us!"

"Need a hand?"

A smooth, playful voice drifted down from the staircase above them.

They looked up. Leaning against the wall, twirling an arrow in his fingers, was a young man with orange hair and a red scarf.

Childe.

"You lot look like you've had a rough day," Childe grinned, his dull blue eyes scanning the terrified group. "Assassination? Daring escapes? Abandoned comrades? Now *that* is a story I want to hear."

He pushed off the wall, landing softly in front of them.

"Come with me," Childe offered a hand. "Unless you want to join your friends in prison."

Aether hesitated, his grip tightening on his sword. "Who are you?"

"Just a concerned citizen," Childe lied effortlessly. "Call me Childe."

Chapter 31: Chapter 24A-1: The Sigil and the Stag

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Liuli Pavilion (Private Room)

"You want us to go *where*?"

Haruka Kiritani stood with her arms crossed, staring down the orange-haired man who had just paid for their meal and cleared the guards from the street.

"Jueyun Karst," Childe repeated, spinning a chopstick in his fingers. He smiled, a gesture that didn't quite reach his dull blue eyes. "The realm of the Adepti. The Guardians of Liyue."

"And why would we do that?" Haruka pressed. "We are fugitives. Running into the mountains seems like a good way to get cornered."

"Because you need a lawyer," Childe chuckled. "Or in this case, a divine jury. The Qixing—the leaders of the city—have locked down the harbor. They believe you killed Rex Lapis. The only ones with enough authority to overrule the Qixing... are the Adepti."

He reached into his pocket and tossed a glowing talisman onto the table. It was old, paper-yellowed, and pulsed with a faint elemental energy.

Sigil of Permission.

"Take this," Childe said. "It’s a relic from the Archon War. It will stop the Adepti from turning you into mulch the moment you step on their grass."

Aether picked up the Sigil. "And what do you get out of this?"

"Me?" Childe leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. "I just hate seeing a good story end prematurely. Besides... chaos is a ladder, as they say. While you distract the Adepti, I might find some answers of my own."

He looked at Ichika, who was clutching her heavy Waster Greatsword nervously.

"Go," Childe ordered, his tone sharpening. "Your friends in prison don't have much time. The Qixing are efficient interrogators."

Ichika flinched. "Tsukasa-senpai... Mafuyu-san..."

"We’ll go," Ichika said, grabbing the sword strap. She looked at Aether. "We have to clear our names to save them."

Location: Jueyun Karst

The journey was grueling. The stone forests of Liyue were vertical mazes of amber and rock. Fog clung to the peaks, hiding the path.

"This terrain..." Haruka panted, using her iron spear as a walking stick. "It’s not designed for humans."

"It’s designed for gods," Paimon whispered, floating closer to Aether. "Be quiet. Paimon feels... eyes."

They reached a massive wooden platform in the center of the peaks. An ancient altar stood there, surrounded by offerings that had long since rotted away.

"This is it," Aether said. "Moon Carver’s domain."

He stepped forward, placing the **Sigil of Permission** on the altar. He also placed a plate of "Delicious Jewelry Soup" (which Paimon had insisted they cook earlier).

"Oh, Adeptus!" Paimon yelled. "We have a permit! And soup!"

The ground shook.

From the mist, a shape materialized. It wasn't a human. It was a massive stag, with antlers made of glowing azure crystal and intricate markings along its fur.

Moon Carver.

"WHO DISTURBS THE SANCTUARY?"

The voice boomed like thunder, vibrating in their chests.

Haruka and Ichika instinctively stepped back. This wasn't like Dvalin, who was pained and confused. This being radiated pure, ancient authority.

"Travelers," Aether stepped forward, bowing respectfully. "We seek audience regarding the death of Rex Lapis."

"DEATH?" Moon Carver stamped a hoof, cracking the stone floor. **"PREPOSTEROUS! REX LAPIS CANNOT DIE! HE IS THE PRIME OF ADEPTI!"**

"It's true!" Paimon squeaked. "We saw it! At the Rite of Descension! He fell from the sky!"

Moon Carver stared at them, his golden eyes narrowing. **"Assassination? In the Harbor? By whom? The Qixing?"**

"We don't know," Haruka spoke up, trying to keep her voice steady. "But we are being blamed for it. We need your help to find the truth."

"INTRUDERS!"

A shout came from the path behind them.

A squad of Millelith guards burst onto the platform, spears leveled. The Sergeant pointed at Aether.

"There they are! The assassins!" The Sergeant yelled. "And... a monster! Secure the area!"

Moon Carver looked at the Millelith. **"MONSTER? YOU DARE CALL ME A MONSTER ON MY OWN HOLY GROUND?"**

The stag's antlers glowed.

"They're attacking!" Ichika gasped.

"Don't kill them!" Haruka ordered, spinning her spear. "They're just doing their jobs! Defensive maneuvers only!"

Combat Start.

Aether took point, using Anemo to push the front line back.

"Hah!" Haruka dashed forward. She didn't stab; she used the shaft of her spear to sweep the legs of two guards, knocking them down. Her idol training gave her perfect balance, weaving through their clumsy thrusts like she was on stage.

But a heavy-armored guard charged Ichika.

"Look out!"

Ichika raised the **Waster Greatsword**. It was heavy. Clunky. But in that moment, she remembered the feeling of the shield she had made for Haruka. She didn't need to be fast. She needed to be a wall.

She slammed the flat of the blade into the ground.

CLANG.

She braced her shoulder against the blade. The guard's spear hit the broadside of the sword with a ringing impact that shook Ichika's bones, but she didn't budge.

"I won't... let you pass!" Ichika gritted out.

She shoved the sword forward, using the sheer weight of the iron to knock the guard backward.

"BEGONE!"

Moon Carver had seen enough. He unleashed a pulse of Geo energy. The ground rippled, and the Millelith were thrown off the platform, sliding down the slope in a heap of tangled limbs and armor.

They scrambled up and ran, terrified of the angry god.

The Verdict

Silence returned to the Karst.

Moon Carver looked down at the group. He looked at the Sigil. He looked at the soup (which was spilled).

"To disturb the Rite... to accuse travelers... and to trespass on Jueyun Karst..."

The stag shook his head, his anger turning into a cold, dangerous resolve.

"The Liyue Qixing have gone too far. They have forgotten their place."

He turned his gaze to Aether.

"Traveler. And... strange Outlanders. You have brought this news. I will not harm you."

"Will you help us?" Ichika asked, sheathing her sword.

"I cannot act alone," Moon Carver stated. **"This matter requires the assembly of the Adepti. You must go to the others."**

He raised a hoof, pointing to the distant peaks.

"Seek Mountain Shaper on Mt. Hulao. Seek Cloud Retainer on Mt. Aocang. And seek the Conqueror of Demons at Wangshu Inn."

"Tell them: The contract is broken. Rex Lapis is dead."

Moon Carver faded into the mist, leaving them alone on the windy platform.

"We have to climb *more* mountains?" Paimon groaned.

"It's the only way," Haruka said, looking at the map. "If we get the Adepti on our side, we can pressure the Qixing to release Tsukasa and Mafuyu."

"Then let's move," Aether said. "Before the Millelith come back with reinforcements."

Chapter End Notes

We are splitting the chapters here

24A - Team Aether
24B - Team Mafuyu

Chapter 32: Chapter 24B-1: The Die is Cast

Location: Ministry of Civil Affairs - Secret Detention Chamber

The room was damp, dark, and smelled of stale tea and old iron. There were no windows. The only light came from a single, flickering lantern hanging above the heavy wooden table.

Tsukasa Tenma sat in a wooden chair, his wrists bound tightly behind his back with rope that glowed with a faint Geo seal.

"This is an outrage!" Tsukasa shouted at the steel door for the tenth time. "I demand to see the manager! Or the director! You cannot hold a World Future Star in a dungeon! My complexion requires sunlight!"

He turned to look at Mafuyu, who was seated in the chair next to him, equally bound. She was staring at a crack in the stone floor, her face blank.

"Asahina, are you alright?" Tsukasa whispered, his bravado slipping. "Your ribs..."

"They hurt a little," Mafuyu replied quietly. "But the adrenaline is gone. Now it is just... dull."

Click. Clack. Click.

The sound of heels echoing on stone stopped Tsukasa’s heart. The heavy steel door groaned open.

A woman walked in.

She didn't look like a guard. She wore a dark blue bodysuit with white fur trim, and a blue coat draped casually over her shoulders. Her short dark hair framed a face that was beautiful, sharp, and terrifyingly intelligent.

She didn't speak. She pulled a chair out, spun it around, and sat down straddling it, resting her chin on her hand. She looked at them with eyes that seemed to glow in the dark.

She held up a small, hydro-infused die in her fingers. She flicked it.

Roll.

The die landed on the table. Six dots.

"High roll," the woman purred, her voice smooth like velvet over a blade. "That means you get to speak first. Convince me not to peel the skin off your bones."

Yelan.

Tsukasa gulped. "I... I am Tsukasa Tenma! We are travelers! We merely—"

"Lies," Yelan interrupted. She didn't raise her voice. She simply lifted a finger.

Zip.

A thin, glowing blue thread materialized from thin air. It wrapped around Tsukasa's neck, tightening just enough to cut off his breath.

"Gah—!" Tsukasa choked, his eyes bulging.

"I work in intelligence, little star," Yelan said, leaning forward. "I know a performance when I see one. Your posture, your projection... you're acting. Badly."

She tightened the thread.

"Who sent you? The Fatui? The Abyss? Or did you poison the incense yourself?"

"We... didn't..." Tsukasa wheezed, clawing uselessly at the invisible wire. "We just... wanted... to see the dragon..."

Yelan watched his pulse. She watched his pupils dilate.

'Fear,' she analyzed. *'Genuine panic. He's not a trained assassin. He's a civilian terrified for his life.'*

She flicked her finger. The thread loosened, allowing Tsukasa to gasp for air, coughing violently.

"Pathetic," Yelan noted. She turned her gaze to the girl.

Mafuyu hadn't flinched. She hadn't screamed when Tsukasa was choked. She was just... watching.

"And you," Yelan said, her interest piqued. She stood up and walked around the table, trailing a finger along the wood until she stood behind Mafuyu. "You're different. You're not scared."

Yelan leaned down, whispering into Mafuyu's ear.

"Your friend almost died just now. Didn't you care?"

"He wasn't going to die," Mafuyu said. Her voice was flat. Monotone.

Yelan paused. "Oh?"

"You are looking for information," Mafuyu stated, staring straight ahead at the lantern. "Dead people cannot talk. You were testing his pain threshold to see if he would break character. He didn't, because he isn't playing a character. He is just loud."

Yelan's eyes narrowed. The smile dropped from her face.

This girl... analyzed the torture while it was happening.

"Smart," Yelan murmured. She summoned a Hydro thread, wrapping it around Mafuyu's injured torso, right over her broken ribs. She squeezed.

"And what about you?" Yelan asked. "Do you break?"

Pain shot through Mafuyu's side. It was sharp, blinding agony.

But Mafuyu didn't scream. She didn't beg. She just closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

'This pain... is simple,' Mafuyu thought. *'It's just physical. It's easier than Mother's disappointment.'*

She opened her eyes and looked up at Yelan. Her gaze was empty. A void.

"We didn't kill your God," Mafuyu said. "We don't even know his name."

Yelan stared into those empty purple eyes. She had interrogated spies, traitors, and thieves. She had seen men break at the sight of her bow. But this girl... looking into her eyes was like looking into a deep, dark well. There was nothing there to threaten.

Yelan released the threads. They dissolved into water.

"Interesting," Yelan straightened up, crossing her arms. "You're telling the truth. Or you're the best liar I've ever met."

"We are innocent!" Tsukasa rasped, rubbing his neck.

"You're certainly not the assassins," Yelan concluded, picking up her die. "Assassins would be competent. You two are... anomalies."

She walked to the door.

"Wait!" Tsukasa yelled. "Are you letting us go?"

"No," Yelan glanced back, a mysterious smirk returning to her lips. "I'm just done with the preliminary screening. Now that I know you aren't an immediate threat... I'm handing you over to the Yuheng."

She knocked on the door.

"Be grateful," Yelan said as the guards opened the door. "I'm the nightmare. She is merely... the law."

Yelan stepped out, leaving them in the dark again.

As the door closed, Tsukasa slumped in his chair. "That woman... was terrifying. She looked at me like I was an ingredient for soup."

He looked at Mafuyu.

"Asahina... how did you stay so calm?"

Mafuyu looked at her bruised wrists.

"She wasn't looking for the truth," Mafuyu whispered. "She was looking for fear. If you don't give it to her... she gets bored."

Chapter 33: Chapter 24A-2: The Mountain of Amber

Location: Mt. Hulao

The path to the second Adeptus was a winding trail of vibrant orange and gold. Mt. Hulao was beautiful, but it felt dangerous. Large, glowing crystals of amber grew out of the ground like jagged teeth, some as tall as trees.

"This scenery," Haruka noted, tapping the shaft of her spear against a crystal. "It’s unnatural. These didn't grow geologically. They were placed."

"Paimon heard that the Adeptus here, **Mountain Shaper**, has a bad temper!" Paimon whispered, floating close to Ichika. "He plants these amber traps to catch thieves who try to steal his treasures."

"Traps?" Ichika looked at the beautiful crystals warily. "They look so pretty, though."

"Help! Someone! Anyone!"

A muffled, desperate voice echoed from further up the path.

Aether drew his sword instantly. "That came from the ridge."

They ran up the slope. In a clearing surrounded by cranes, they found a massive chunk of amber. Inside, frozen in a pose of abject terror, was a man. He was dressed in the rough clothes of a Treasure Hoarder.

"Please!" the man yelled, his voice muffled by the crystal. "I can't breathe! It’s suffocating in here! Get me out!"

"He's trapped," Ichika gasped, stepping forward.

"Wait," Haruka put a hand on Ichika’s shoulder. She scanned the area. "He’s a Treasure Hoarder. He probably tried to rob the mountain. If we free him, we might anger the Adeptus."

"But we can't just leave him to die!" Ichika argued, looking at the man's terrified eyes. "Look at him, Haruka-chan. He's suffering."

Haruka sighed. Ichika was right. They weren't executioners.

"Fine," Haruka nodded. "Aether, watch our backs. Ichika... you have the heavy blade. Smash it."

"Right!"

Ichika gripped the handle of her **Waster Greatsword**. It was heavy, unrefined, and ugly compared to the elegant weapons of the Knights, but it had mass.

She planted her feet, channeling her anxiety into force.

"Hah!"

Ichika swung. The flat of the heavy blade slammed into the amber.

CRACK.

The crystal shattered into a thousand glittering shards. The Treasure Hoarder collapsed onto the grass, gasping for air.

"Oh, thank the Archons!" the man wheezed. "I thought I was a goner! That bird... that cursed bird planted these everywhere!"

"You shouldn't be stealing," Paimon scolded, hands on her hips.

"I learned my lesson! I'm going straight home! I swear!" The man scrambled to his feet and ran down the mountain as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Well," Aether sheathed his sword. "That's one problem solved."

"WHO DARES TOUCH MY AMBER?"

The sky turned dark. A gust of wind flattened the grass.

A massive crane with feathers of brown and gold descended from the sky, landing with a ground-shaking thud where the amber had just been.

Mountain Shaper.

"Uh oh," Paimon hid behind Ichika.

The Adeptus glared at them with eyes that burned like molten gold. **"Thieves! Vandals! You dare release the prisoner I rightfully captured? You dare destroy the karsts of my mountain?"**

"We aren't thieves!" Ichika stepped forward, shielding Paimon. She was terrified—this bird was huge—but she held her ground. "We... we saved a human life!"

"A life of a thief is of no consequence to the mountain!" Mountain Shaper boomed, spreading his wings. **"Ignorant mortals. You shall pay for your insolence in their stead!"**

"Wait!" Haruka stepped in front of Ichika, holding up the **Sigil of Permission**. "We are not here to vandalize. We bear the Sigil!"

Mountain Shaper paused. He craned his long neck down, inspecting the glowing talisman in Haruka's hand.

"The Sigil of Permission..." The Adeptus lowered his wings, though his voice remained stern. **"It has been centuries since one of these was presented. Why is it in the hands of...**

children?"

"We are messengers," Aether said solemnly. "We come from Liyue Harbor with grave news."

"Speak," Mountain Shaper commanded.

"Rex Lapis... has been assassinated," Aether said.

The silence on the mountain was absolute. Even the wind seemed to stop.

"Assassinated?" Mountain Shaper repeated the word, as if it were a foreign language. **"Rex Lapis? The Prime of Adepti? By whom?"**

"We don't know," Haruka explained quickly. "But the Liyue Qixing have locked down the harbor. They are casting suspicion on travelers. We fear they are hiding the truth."

"The Qixing..." Mountain Shaper's eyes glowed with fury. **"Those merchants think they can rule Liyue? They think they can hide the death of a God?"**

He looked toward the direction of the harbor, his beak clacking in anger.

"Moon Carver was right to send you. This treachery cannot stand."

He turned back to the group.

"I will depart for the harbor immediately. I will demand answers from the Qixing. If they have betrayed the contract... Liyue will drown."

"Wait, drown?" Ichika panicked. "Our friends are in the harbor!"

"Then pray they are innocent," Mountain Shaper declared. **"Go. Seek Cloud Retainer. She is the most... emotional of us. She will want to know."**

With a powerful beat of his wings, Mountain Shaper took to the sky, heading toward the gathering storm.

"That went... okay?" Paimon guessed.

"He seemed very angry," Ichika whispered, lowering her sword.

"We're running out of time," Haruka noted, looking at the distant peaks. "If the Adepti attack the city while Tsukasa and Mafuyu are still inside... it will be a war zone."

"To Mt. Aocang," Aether decided. "We have to hurry."

Chapter 34: Chapter 24B-2: The Yuheng’s Judgment

Location: Ministry of Civil Affairs - Upper Office

The transition was jarring. One moment, they were in a damp, dark cell; the next, they were escorted by guards up a flight of stairs and into a brightly lit, opulent office overlooking the harbor.

The room smelled of paperwork and expensive ink.

"Sit," a sharp voice commanded.

Tsukasa collapsed into a plush chair, rubbing his wrists where the ropes had finally been cut. "Civilization! Sunlight! My skin can finally breathe!"

Mafuyu sat down quietly next to him. She adjusted her sweater, her expression unreadable.

Two women stood on the other side of the massive desk.

One was a young woman with light purple hair tied in twintails (resembling cat ears) and a dress that looked both elegant and practical for combat. She radiated an aura of intense, impatient efficiency.

Keqing. The Yuheng of the Liyue Qixing.

Standing beside her, looking slightly overworked and holding a clipboard, was a woman with blue hair and curved horns protruding from her head.

Ganyu. General Secretary of the Liyue Qixing.

"I am Keqing," the purple-haired woman stated, not looking up from a stack of documents. "Yelan’s report says you are 'harmless anomalies.' I prefer to verify such claims myself."

She looked up, her amethyst eyes piercing.

"State your names and your purpose in Liyue. And no theatrical speeches. I have a city in crisis and a dead God to manage. I do not have time for bad acting."

Tsukasa opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked at Keqing’s sword, which was leaning against the desk. He decided to drop the "World Star" persona for a moment.

"Tsukasa Tenma," he said normally. "And this is Mafuyu Asahina. We... we really just wanted to see the Rite. We heard it was a grand spectacle."

"A spectacle," Keqing repeated, a hint of disdain in her voice. "Is that all Rex Lapis is to you tourists? A magic show?"

"Lady Keqing," Ganyu interjected softly, her voice melodic and soothing. "Please, they are terrified. They were just... processed by Yelan."

Ganyu walked around the desk, placing two cups of warm tea in front of them.

"Please, drink," Ganyu offered a gentle smile. "It will help with the shock. I apologize for the rough treatment. The Millelith are... on edge."

Mafuyu looked at the tea. "Thank you."

Keqing crossed her arms. "Let’s get to the point. Yelan says you didn't kill the Archon. I agree. You lack the elemental capacity and the political motive."

She walked to the window, looking out at the panicked city below.

"However, you ran. Why?"

"Because your guards pointed spears at us," Tsukasa pointed out. "It seemed like a very compelling reason to leave."

"Valid," Keqing conceded. She turned to Mafuyu. "But you didn't run. You stayed behind to shield him. Why?"

"He is..." Mafuyu paused, searching for the right word. "Loud. Reckless. If I left him, he would have tried to negotiate with a spear."

Tsukasa sputtered. "I would have—!"

"Pragmatic," Keqing nodded, ignoring Tsukasa. "I respect that. Loyalty and efficiency are rare traits."

Keqing walked back to the desk, leaning forward.

"Here is the situation. Rex Lapis is dead. The city is in lockdown. The Fatui are circling like vultures, and the Adepti in the mountains are likely preparing to rain wrath down upon us for 'failing' to protect their master."

Ganyu flinched. "Lady Keqing, surely the Adepti will understand that we—"

"The Adepti understand nothing but old contracts," Keqing snapped, though not unkindly. "They think humans are children who cannot rule themselves. This is our chance to prove them wrong."

She looked at Tsukasa and Mafuyu.

"I cannot let you leave Liyue. You are material witnesses to the assassination. However, I have no interest in keeping innocent civilians in a dungeon."

Keqing grabbed a stamped paper from her desk and slid it across the wood.

"This is a temporary residence permit. You are released into the city. You will stay at the **Yanshang Teahouse**. You will not leave the city limits. You will report to the Ministry every morning."

Tsukasa picked up the paper, his hands trembling slightly with relief. "House arrest?"

"Protective custody," Keqing corrected. "If the true assassin is still out there, they might target witnesses. And if the Adepti attack... you'll be safer behind the walls."

"The Adepti... might attack?" Mafuyu asked.

Ganyu looked down, clutching her clipboard. "It is... a possibility. If they believe the Qixing conspired to kill the Emperor... they will come to judge us."

Keqing straightened up, adjusting her gloves.

"Let them come. Liyue belongs to humanity now. We will find the truth ourselves."

She waved a hand at the door.

"You are dismissed. Ganyu, escort them to the teahouse. And get them some food. They look like they haven't eaten since Mondstadt."

"Yes, Lady Keqing," Ganyu bowed.

As they stood up to leave, Tsukasa stopped. He looked at Keqing.

"You... you aren't sad," Tsukasa noted. "Everyone else is crying. But you look... determined."

Keqing met his gaze.

"The time of the Adepti has passed," Keqing said firmly. "If Rex Lapis is gone, then it is time for us to write our own script. Don't you agree, Mr. Actor?"

Tsukasa stared at her. Writing your own script... rewriting the ending...

"Yes," Tsukasa smiled, a spark of his old confidence returning. "I suppose I do."

Location: Outside the Ministry

Ganyu walked them down the stairs. The sun was bright, but the city felt heavy with grief.

"I apologize for Lady Keqing's intensity," Ganyu said softly. "She... she cares deeply for Liyue. She just expresses it differently."

"She is scary," Tsukasa whispered. "But efficient."

"Ganyu-san," Mafuyu spoke up.

"Yes?"

"You aren't human, are you?"

Ganyu froze. She touched the horns on her head instinctively. "I... I am half-qilin. Half-human, half-Adeptus."

She looked at the mountains in the distance, where Team Aether was currently climbing.

"I stand between two worlds," Ganyu admitted sadly. "The humans want to rule themselves. The Adepti want to protect their contract. And I... I do not know where I belong."

Mafuyu looked at her.

'Between worlds.'

"We understand," Mafuyu said.

Chapter 35: Chapter 24A-3: The Cloud and the Architect

Location: Mt. Aocang

The climb to Mt. Aocang was steep, but the summit was surprisingly peaceful. A large, crystal-clear lake sat in the center, surrounded by maple trees shedding red leaves.

In the middle of the lake was a stone table with three seats.

"It’s... beautiful," Ichika whispered, lowering her heavy sword to the grass. "It feels like a garden."

"It feels lonely," Haruka corrected gently. She walked to the edge of the water. She pointed at the stone table. "Three seats. But only one has a tea set."

"This is Cloud Retainer's abode!" Paimon explained, hovering over the water. "She loves food! Legend says she only appears if you offer her delicious dishes!"

Aether checked the stone tablet nearby. "We need to make offerings. Matsutake Meat Rolls, Mora Meat, and Jewelry Soup."

"Cooking?" Haruka tied her hair back, a determined glint in her eyes. "Leave the presentation to me. An idol must maintain strict diet control, but that means I know exactly how to make food look appetizing."

"And I'll... chop things!" Ichika volunteered, lifting her Waster Greatsword. "I can cut the meat!"

"Please don't use the claymore for cooking," Aether sighed. "I have a knife."

The Offering

It took an hour of foraging and cooking at the ancient stove nearby.

Haruka worked with the precision of a surgeon. She arranged the Mora Meat into perfect circles, glazed the Meat Rolls until they shone, and garnished the Jewelry Soup with floating snapdragons.

"It looks too good to eat," Paimon drooled.

"Presentation is half the flavor," Haruka stated, wiping her hands. "Now, we place them on the table."

They set the dishes down. The steam rose into the cool mountain air.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then, the barrier sealing the inner cave dissolved. A warm wind swept across the lake.

"One senses the aroma of culinary perfection."

A voice, haughty and feminine, echoed from the sky.

A magnificent white crane with blue and gold plumage descended, landing gracefully by the table. She tucked her wings, inspecting the food with a critical eye.

Cloud Retainer.

"Matsutake Meat Rolls... perfectly seared. Jewelry Soup... the broth is clear. One is pleased."

She looked at the group.

"It has been decades since one has tasted such devotion. Speak, mortals. Why have you sought audience with Cloud Retainer?"

"We bear the Sigil of Permission," Aether said, showing the talisman.

"The Sigil..." Cloud Retainer's eyes narrowed. **"And you have brought food. You seek a favor? Or perhaps you wish for one to build you a mechanism?"**

"We bring news," Haruka stepped forward, bowing respectfully. "Bad news. From Liyue Harbor."

Cloud Retainer stiffened. **"Speak."**

"Rex Lapis... has been assassinated," Aether said.

The reaction was immediate.

Cloud Retainer didn't shout like Moon Carver or rage like Mountain Shaper. She went deadly still. She stared at the empty seat at the table—the seat reserved for the Geo Archon.

"Assassinated?"

Her voice trembled. It wasn't just anger. It was grief.

"Morax... dead? At the Rite of Descension? In the heart of his own city?"

She spread her wings, and the peaceful atmosphere of the mountain shattered. A gale force wind ripped the leaves from the trees.

"OUTRAGEOUS!" Cloud Retainer screeched. **"The humans of Liyue... they have enjoyed his protection for millennia! And this is how they repay him?!"**

She looked toward the direction of the harbor.

"If the Qixing cannot protect their God... then they are unfit to rule! One shall descend upon the harbor! One shall wipe the city from the face of the earth with a mechanism of mass destruction!"

"Wait!" Ichika gasped. "Wipe the city?! But there are innocent people there!"

"They allowed the Emperor to die!" Cloud Retainer snapped. **"They are all complicit!"**

"They are grieving too!" Haruka shouted over the wind.

Cloud Retainer paused, looking down at the blue-haired girl. **"Grieving?"**

"We were there," Haruka said, standing her ground against the adeptal pressure. "We saw the people. They were terrified. They were crying. Rex Lapis wasn't just a god to them... he was their history."

Haruka pointed to the stone table with the three seats.

"You built this place to remember your friends, didn't you?" Haruka asked softly. "Because you miss them."

Cloud Retainer flinched. She looked at the empty seats—Guizhong's seat, Rex Lapis's seat.

"The people of Liyue are feeling that same loss right now," Haruka continued. "If you destroy the city... you destroy the legacy he built. Is that what he would have wanted?"

Cloud Retainer stared at Haruka. The wind died down. The crane lowered her head, looking suddenly very old and very tired.

"You have a sharp tongue, child," Cloud Retainer murmured. **"And you speak with the weight of one who knows loss."**

She sighed, a sound like rustling feathers.

"Very well. One shall not destroy the city... yet."

She looked at Aether.

"But the Qixing must answer for this. Moon Carver and Mountain Shaper have already called the summons. We gather."

"Go to Wangshu Inn," Cloud Retainer commanded. **"Seek the Conqueror of Demons. He is the last. Once he knows... the Adepti will descend on Liyue."**

"The Conqueror of Demons?" Paimon gulped. "Sounds friendly."

"He is not," Cloud Retainer warned. **"But he is loyal. Go."**

With a flap of her wings, Cloud Retainer took to the sky, flying toward the cloud peaks to mourn her old friend.

"We did it," Ichika exhaled, her legs shaking. "She... she was scary."

"She was sad," Haruka corrected, looking at the stone table. "She's just lonely."

"One more," Aether said, looking at the map. "Xiao. At Wangshu Inn."

Chapter 36: Chapter 24B-3: The Wallet and the Consultant

Location: Liyue Harbor - Northland Bank Entrance

The sun was setting over the harbor, painting the red wooden buildings in shades of gold and fire.

"Free at last!" Tsukasa stretched his arms, inhaling the salty air. "Although, 'House Arrest' implies we need a house. And dinner. I am starving!"

"We have the residence permit," Mafuyu reminded him, holding the paper Ganyu had given them. "But we have no money."

"Yo! You two look like you need a friend."

A familiar, cheerful voice called out from the balcony of the massive building above them. **Childe** leaned over the railing, waving enthusiastically.

"I heard the Qixing let you go! Congratulations on not being executed!"

Tsukasa squinted. "Ah! It is the Orange Gentleman! The one who... uh... helped Aether escape?"

"That's me," Childe hopped down from the balcony, landing lightly. "And I'm assuming you're hungry. Come on. I have a reservation at **Liuli Pavilion**, and I’m meeting someone interesting. You should join us."

Tsukasa hesitated. "We have no Mora to pay you back."

"My treat!" Childe winked. "Consider it an apology for the mess at the Rite. Besides, I love hearing stories from... out of town."

Mafuyu watched him. He was smiling. His posture was relaxed. He looked like a friendly, wealthy merchant.

But Mafuyu saw his eyes. They were a dull, flat blue.

‘He is acting,’ Mafuyu realized instantly. *‘He wears a mask. Just like I do.’*

She didn't trust him. But she was hungry, and Tsukasa was already halfway up the stairs.

"A free meal! A Star never refuses hospitality!"

Location: Liuli Pavilion

The private room was lavish. Silk curtains, porcelain vases, and the smell of expensive tea.

Seated at the table was a man who looked like he had been carved from the very stone of Liyue. He wore a long brown coat with amber patterns, and his posture was so perfect it made Tsukasa sit up straighter instinctively.

He was sipping tea with his eyes closed.

"Ah, Childe," the man said, his voice deep and resonant like the earth itself. "You are late. And you brought guests."

"Found some strays," Childe laughed, pulling out a chair. "This is Tsukasa and Mafuyu. Friends of the Traveler. Guys, this is **Zhongli**. He's a consultant for the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor."

"Funeral Parlor?" Tsukasa blinked. "A grim profession!"

"It is a profession of tradition," Zhongli corrected calmly, setting his cup down. "We oversee the final journey of mortals and adepti alike. It requires a certain... attention to detail."

He looked at Tsukasa, then at Mafuyu.

"You carry a strange aura," Zhongli noted. "Not of this world. Yet... stable."

"We are travelers," Mafuyu said shortly.

"I see," Zhongli didn't press. He gestured to the menu. "Please. Order whatever you wish. The Liuli Pavilion is famous for its Liuli Style cooking."

"I shall have the most dramatic dish on the menu!" Tsukasa declared.

"Golden Shrimp Balls," Zhongli suggested. "And perhaps the Adeptus' Temptation."

As they ate, the conversation turned to the assassination.

"The Qixing are suppressing the news," Zhongli said, his tone matter-of-fact. "They have hidden the Exuvia—the body of the Archon—and refuse to allow anyone to pay their respects. It is... improper."

"Improper?" Childe leaned back, grinning. "It's suspicious! They're definitely hiding something. Don't you think, Zhongli?"

"Regardless of their intent," Zhongli continued, ignoring Childe's bait. "Rex Lapis deserves a proper farewell. A **Rite of Parting**."

"A Rite of Parting?" Tsukasa asked, chewing a shrimp ball.

"A final ceremony to send the God off," Zhongli explained. "But with the Qixing locking everything down, no one is organizing it. It is a tragedy."

"So," Childe interjected. "I figured, why not let the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor handle it? And since you guys are stuck here... maybe you can help?"

"Help organize a funeral for a God?" Tsukasa's eyes lit up. "A grand finale for the Lord of Geo? The stage... the pomp... the historical significance!"

He slammed his hand on the table.

"I, Tsukasa Tenma, accept this role! We shall give this Archon a send-off worthy of a legend!"

"Excellent," Zhongli nodded approvingly. "I appreciate your enthusiasm. We will need to procure several items. Noctilucous Jade of the highest quality, for starters."

"Jade!" Tsukasa nodded. "We shall buy it all!"

The bill arrived.

The waiter placed the slip on the table. It was an astronomical sum.

Zhongli picked it up. He looked at it. He patted his pockets. He patted his chest.

He blinked.

"It appears," Zhongli said calmly. "I have forgotten my wallet."

Silence filled the room.

"Again?" Childe laughed, shaking his head. "Zhongli, you are the most knowledgeable man in Liyue, but you have no concept of money!"

"Commerce is... a detail I often overlook," Zhongli admitted without a hint of embarrassment.

"Put it on my tab," Childe waved to the waiter. "Northland Bank covers all expenses for Mr. Zhongli."

"Thank you, Childe," Zhongli said.

Mafuyu watched the exchange.

Zhongli—the man who knew everything but carried nothing. Childe—the man who paid for everything but smiled with dead eyes.

'One is a puppet master,' Mafuyu thought, looking at Childe. *'And the other... is just watching the play.'*

"So," Childe turned to Mafuyu, his grin widening. "You're quiet. Not enjoying the food?"

"It is fine," Mafuyu said.

"You know," Childe leaned in, his voice dropping slightly. "My subordinates told me about a girl in Mondstadt. Purple hair. No Vision. Scratched the face of a Harbinger."

The air in the room grew heavy. Tsukasa froze mid-chew.

Childe stared at Mafuyu.

"That wouldn't be you, would it?"

Mafuyu met his gaze. She didn't flinch. She didn't deny it.

"She was rude," Mafuyu said.

Childe stared at her for a second. Then, he threw his head back and laughed. It was a loud, boisterous sound that startled the other patrons.

"Hahaha! 'Rude'! You scratched La Signora because she was *rude*!" Childe wiped a tear from his eye. "Oh, that is rich! I like you, girl! You have guts!"

He stood up, tossing a bag of Mora onto the table.

"Keep an eye on this one, Zhongli. She's dangerous."

"I shall," Zhongli agreed, looking at Mafuyu with a thoughtful expression.

"Well! I have business at the Bank!" Childe waved. "Enjoy the Rite of Parting planning! If you need money, you know where to find me!"

He walked out.

Mafuyu watched him go. Her hands were clenched under the table.

"He is dangerous," Mafuyu whispered to Tsukasa.

"He paid for dinner!" Tsukasa whispered back. "And he is funding our production! Keep your suspicions hidden, Asahina! We need the budget!"

Mafuyu looked at Zhongli, who was calmly drinking his tea as if he hadn't just witnessed a Harbinger threaten a teenager.

‘This city,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘Is full of monsters wearing human faces.’*

Chapter 37: Chapter 24A-4: The Vigilant Yaksha

Location: Wangshu Inn - Top Balcony

The elevator ride to the top of Wangshu Inn felt like ascending to a different world. The noise of the marsh below faded, replaced by the whistling of the wind and the rustle of leaves from the massive tree that supported the structure.

"The boss lady said he hangs out on the balcony," Paimon whispered, floating low. "She said he's... intense."

They stepped onto the wide terrace. The view was spectacular, but the figure standing at the railing drew all the attention.

He was young, with teal hair and intricate tattoos glowing on his arm. He wore a mask on his hip and carried a jade spear. He was staring out at the marsh, motionless as a statue.

Xiao. The Conqueror of Demons.

Aether stepped forward, holding up the **Sigil of Permission**.

"Adeptus Xiao," Aether called out.

Xiao didn't turn around.

"To the ones standing behind you," Xiao's voice was cold, sharp, and dismissive. **"Leave. You are disrupting the flow of mana."**

"We bear the Sigil!" Paimon insisted. "We need to talk to you!"

Xiao turned his head slightly. His golden eyes were piercing.

"A Sigil... merely a pass to enter. It does not grant you an audience. The world of the Adepti is not for mortals. Your souls are too fragile to withstand the karma here. Begone."

He vanished.

Teleported. Just like that.

"Hey!" Paimon stomped the air. "So rude! Every Adeptus in this country has an attitude problem!"

"He's in pain," Haruka said suddenly.

Ichika blinked. "Pain?"

"Did you see his posture?" Haruka walked to the railing where Xiao had stood. "Tense shoulders. Shallow breathing. And his eyes... they looked exhausted. Like he hasn't slept in centuries."

"Well, he *is* the Vigilant Yaksha," Aether noted. "He fights the remnants of dead gods every night. That kind of karma... it hurts."

"We need to get him to listen," Ichika said. "But how? He won't even stay in the same room as us."

"Food!" Paimon declared. "Verr Goldet said he likes **Almond Tofu**! It reminds him of a 'sweet dream'!"

Location: The Kitchen

They went down to the kitchen to ask the chef, Smiley Yanxiao, to make the dish.

But the kitchen was in chaos.

"I can't do it!" the massive, muscular chef was cowering in the corner, holding a spatula like a weapon. "The pots! They're moving on their own! It's a ghost! I'm telling you, this place is haunted!"

"Ghost?" Ichika went pale. She gripped her claymore, her knuckles turning white. "G-G-Ghosts aren't real. They're just... atmospheric anomalies."

"Hee hee..."

A childish giggle echoed from the pantry.

Ichika shrieked, jumping behind Haruka. "IT GIGGLED!"

Aether sighed. "I'll handle this."

He walked to the pantry. Hiding behind a sack of flour was a translucent little girl with glowing blue eyes. **Dusky Ming**.

"Hello," Aether said gently.

"Big brother..." the ghost girl peered out. "Are you playing hide and seek too?"

"We're trying to cook," Haruka stepped forward, gently prying Ichika off her back. Haruka looked at the ghost. She didn't look scary. She looked... lost.

"If we play with you," Haruka offered, kneeling down to eye level. "Will you let the chef work?"

"Play?" Dusky Ming’s eyes lit up. "Okay! Let's play tag! You're it!"

She floated through the wall.

"I am not chasing a ghost," Ichika declared, trembling.

"I'll do it," Aether volunteered. "Haruka, you handle the food. The chef looks like he's about to have a heart attack."

"Understood," Haruka tied her hair back. "I'll make the Almond Tofu. Ichika, help me prep. It will keep your mind off the... spectral activity."

The Offering

An hour later, the ghost was satisfied (Aether was exhausted), and the Almond Tofu was ready.

Haruka had outdone herself. The tofu was silky, perfectly cubed, and garnished with sweet osmanthus syrup. It wobbled delicately on the plate.

They brought it back to the balcony.

"Adeptus Xiao!" Paimon called out. "We brought snacks!"

The wind swirled. Xiao materialized instantly. He looked at the plate. He looked at them.

"You persist?" Xiao scowled. **"Foolish."**

But his gaze lingered on the tofu. He picked up the spoon. He took a bite.

His expression didn't change, but his shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch. The tension in his aura receded, just for a moment.

"Acceptable," Xiao muttered. **"The texture... is like a dream I once had."**

He set the spoon down.

"Very well. You have bought a moment of my time. Speak."

"Rex Lapis is dead," Aether said bluntly.

Xiao froze. The wind on the balcony stopped. The birds went silent.

"Dead?"

The word came out as a hiss.

"Assassinated?" Xiao turned away from them, looking out over the marsh. **"By mortals?"**

"We believe so," Haruka said. "The Qixing have locked down the harbor. They are blocking access to the Exuvia."

Xiao didn't scream. He didn't rage. But the air around him grew heavy, suffocatingly dense with Anemo energy. The black aura of his karma began to bleed off him like smoke.

"Impossible," Xiao whispered. **"The Prime of Adepti... gone?"**

He gripped his spear until the wood creaked.

"I have guarded this land for thousands of years. I have slaughtered demons, eaten dreams, and endured the screams of the dead... all to fulfill his contract."

He turned back to them. His face was a mask of cold fury.

"If the Liyue Qixing have betrayed the Emperor... they will answer to my spear."

"The other Adepti are gathering," Aether informed him. "Moon Carver, Mountain Shaper, and Cloud Retainer. They are moving on the harbor."

"Then I shall join them," Xiao declared. **"I will seek the truth. And if I find treachery... Liyue will be purged."**

He looked at the group.

"You have done your duty, mortals. Leave this place. The coming storm is not for you."

Xiao vanished in a swirl of black wind.

The Aftermath

"Well," Paimon exhaled, floating down from where she had been hiding behind Aether. "That went... better than expected?"

"He's going to attack the city," Ichika worried, clutching her claymore strap. "If all the Adepti attack at once... what happens to the people? What happens to Tsukasa-senpai and Mafuyu-san?"

"We have to get back," Haruka said urgently, looking south toward the distant harbor. "We've united the Adepti, but we might have just started a war. We need to stop them from destroying the harbor before we find the real killer."

"Back to Liyue Harbor," Aether nodded, sheathing his sword. "Let's hope that **Childe** guy has a plan. He's the only lead we have left."

As they headed for the elevator, Haruka glanced back at the balcony where the Yaksha had stood.

"He was sad," Ichika whispered.

"Yeah," Haruka agreed. "He's been fighting alone for so long... and now the one person he fought for is gone."

She tightened her grip on her spear.

"Let's go. We have to find the others."

Chapter 38: Chapter 24B-4: The God of Commerce and the Empty Wallet

Location: Liyue Harbor - The Jade Mystery

The sun beat down on the bustling market of Liyue.

"To send off the Geo Archon," Zhongli explained, walking with his hands clasped behind his back, "we require **Noctilucous Jade** of the finest quality. It must be luminous, yet solid. A vessel for the soul."

"A vessel for the soul!" Tsukasa repeated, scribbling into a small notebook he had bought. "This is gold! The dialogue is exquisite! 'Luminous yet solid'!"

He looked at the stall owner, Shitou.

"Shopkeep! Bring us your most dramatic rocks!"

Shitou blinked. "Uh... sure? I have these three chunks. You can take your pick."

He placed three rough stones on the counter. To the untrained eye, they looked identical.

"Hmph," Tsukasa leaned in, inspecting a rock with intense scrutiny (he had no idea what he was looking at). "This one... it speaks to me! It has... character! Rough edges! A tragic backstory!"

"It’s a rock, Senpai," Mafuyu noted from behind him.

"It is a prop!" Tsukasa corrected. "And props matter!"

"We shall test them," Zhongli interrupted calmly. "Boss, heat them up."

"Heat them?" Shitou asked.

"Yes. Pyro resonance brings out the true nature of the jade. The one that glows the brightest under thermal stress is the superior candidate."

After a brief demonstration (involving a borrowed Pyro lamp), one jade chunk glowed with a magnificent azure light.

"That one," Zhongli pointed. "We will take a crate of it."

"A crate?!" Shitou’s eyes popped. "Sir, this is high-grade jade! That will cost..."

He named a price that made Tsukasa choke on his own spit.

"That is... a significant portion of the budget Childe gave us," Tsukasa whispered to Mafuyu.

"It is necessary," Zhongli said, not even blinking at the price. "The Rite requires perfection. Do we have the funds?"

Tsukasa looked at the heavy bag of Mora Childe had left. He looked at Zhongli's expectant face.

"A Star does not pinch pennies!" Tsukasa declared, slamming the bag onto the counter (and wincing as the coins jingled aggressively). "We take it all!"

Mafuyu watched Zhongli.

'He didn't even ask the price,' she realized. *'He just assumed it would be paid. He walks through this city like he owns it... or like he doesn't understand how it works.'*

Location: The Third-Round Knockout (Perfume Shop)

Their next stop was for **Silk Flowers** to make perfumes for the Rite.

"The Geo Archon had a preferred scent?" Tsukasa asked. "How refined!"

"Rex Lapis took many forms," Zhongli explained. "Different perfumes appeal to different aspects of his divinity. We must craft them all."

They arrived at the perfume shop, manned by a woman with a teasing smile.

Ying'er.

"Oh my," Ying'er leaned over the counter, her eyes scanning the group. "A handsome gentleman, a loud boy, and a quiet flower. What an interesting combination."

She looked at Tsukasa.

"You look... tense, little boy. Are you perhaps... inexperienced with choosing scents for a lady?"

Tsukasa froze, his face turning bright red. "I—I am a World Future Star! I have... vast experience with... aromatics!"

"Is that so?" Ying'er giggled, walking around the counter. She circled Tsukasa, trailing a finger along his shoulder. "You're shaking. Relax. Big sister will teach you how to extract the... essence."

Tsukasa looked like he was about to combust. "Z-Zhongli-san! Help!"

Zhongli stood there, completely unfazed. "Miss Ying'er is an expert. You would do well to listen, Tsukasa."

Ying'er turned her attention to Mafuyu.

"And you, little flower. You're so quiet. Do you like perfume?"

"It smells like chemicals," Mafuyu said flatly.

Ying'er paused. She blinked. "Chemicals?"

"It masks the natural scent," Mafuyu continued, looking at the Silk Flowers. "You boil them to extract the oil. It is a process of destruction to create an artificial facade."

Silence descended on the shop.

Tsukasa stared at Mafuyu. *'That was deep. And kind of dark.'*

Ying'er stared at Mafuyu. Then, she smiled—a real smile this time, dropping the flirtatious act.

"My, my. You see right through the process, don't you?" Ying'er chuckled. "You're not as innocent as you look. Very well. Let's skip the pleasantries and get to the boiling."

Location: Statue of the Seven (Overlooking the Harbor)

With the jade bought and the perfumes crafting, the trio took a break near the Statue of the Seven north of the harbor.

Zhongli stood at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the empty Yujing Terrace where the "corpse" of the dragon had fallen.

"The Rite of Descension," Zhongli murmured. "It has ended in tragedy."

"It was shocking!" Tsukasa agreed, standing beside him. "To see a God fall... it is a plot twist no one expected. The audience is in shambles."

"Do you grieve him?"

The question came from Mafuyu. She was sitting on a rock, hugging her knees.

Zhongli turned to look at her. "Pardon?"

"The people in the city are crying," Mafuyu said. "They are scared. They miss him. But you..."

She looked into Zhongli's amber eyes.

"You are organizing his funeral. You are choosing the jade, the flowers, the scents. You are doing everything perfectly. But you aren't sad."

Tsukasa held his breath. *'Asahina! You can't just ask people why they aren't crying!'*

Zhongli didn't get angry. He looked back at the harbor. His expression was calm, unreadable like stone.

"Liyue is a city of contracts," Zhongli said slowly. "For thousands of years, Rex Lapis honored his contract to guide the people. But every contract must end eventually."

He picked up a falling leaf.

"Perhaps... he felt it was time for the burden to be lifted. Perhaps he felt the city was ready to walk on its own."

He crushed the leaf in his gloved hand.

"As for grief... I have seen many friends pass. The pain does not fade, but one learns to carry it with dignity. To ensure their final journey is proper... that is the greatest respect one can pay."

Mafuyu watched him.

'He speaks of the God as if he were a weary coworker,' she thought.

"You are a strange man, Zhongli-san," Mafuyu said.

"I am often told that," Zhongli smiled faintly. "Come. We must return to the Northland Bank. I believe Childe has arranged for the next step... and our funds are running low."

"Running low?!" Tsukasa shrieked, checking the bag. "We spent three million Mora on ROCKS?!"

"Quality comes at a price," Zhongli stated, walking away.

"Wait for me!" Tsukasa chased after him. "Zhongli-san! We must discuss budget management!"

Mafuyu lingered for a second, looking at the statue of the Geo Archon. The statue sat on a throne, looking confident and eternal.

Then she looked at the back of the consultant walking down the path. The posture was exactly the same.

'A mask,' Mafuyu decided. *'Everyone here wears a mask.'*

Chapter 39: Chapter 25: The Reunion at Northland Bank

Location: Liyue Harbor - Northland Bank

"We’re back," Haruka breathed out, leaning against the cold stone pillar of the bank’s entrance. She pulled her hood down to hide her face. "And we aren't in chains yet."

"Barely," Aether muttered, checking the street below for Millelith patrols. "If Childe isn't here, we're in trouble. The Adepti are on their way, and they didn't sound like they wanted to talk."

"I hope Tsukasa-senpai and Mafuyu-san are okay," Ichika whispered, clutching the strap of her claymore. "Do you think they’re still in prison?"

"Knowing Tsukasa," Paimon sighed. "He probably annoyed the guards until they let him go."

They pushed open the heavy doors of the Northland Bank.

The interior was lavish, filled with the sound of counting coins. And standing near the main counter, engaging in a very loud, very dramatic argument with the receptionist, was a familiar figure in a long coat.

"I am telling you, the budget requires expansion!" Tsukasa Tenma slammed a receipt onto the counter. "High-quality Noctilucous Jade does not pay for itself! We need more funds for the kite makers!"

"Sir," the Fatui receptionist Ekaterina sighed. "Lord Tartaglia already authorized a withdrawal of 500,000 Mora. You spent it all... in one afternoon?"

"Quality!" Tsukasa insisted. "Requires! Capital!"

"Tsukasa-senpai!" Ichika gasped.

Tsukasa spun around. His eyes widened.

"Ichika! Haruka!"

He abandoned the argument and sprinted across the lobby. "You are alive! The fugitives return!"

"Senpai!" Ichika ran forward, grabbing his arm as if to check he was real. "You're safe! We heard you were arrested!"

"A minor setback!" Tsukasa declared, though he looked visibly relieved to see them. "We are currently... under 'house arrest', which is just a fancy term for 'exclusive VIP residency'!"

Haruka walked past them, her eyes locking onto the figure sitting quietly on a bench near the wall.

"Mafuyu-san," Haruka exhaled.

Mafuyu looked up. She looked tired, but unharmed.

"You came back," Mafuyu stated.

"Of course we did," Haruka said, sitting next to her. "We went to the mountains. We found help."

"Help?" Mafuyu tilted her head.

"Hey, hey! A touching reunion!" **Childe** walked out from the VIP office, clapping his hands. "I'm glad to see the gang's all back together. And just in time, too."

He gestured to the man walking out behind him.

It was **Zhongli**. He walked with a slow, deliberate grace, his amber eyes scanning the newcomers.

"Ah," Zhongli said, his voice deep and calm. "You must be the friends Childe spoke of. The ones who traveled Jueyun Karst."

Aether stiffened. "Who are you?"

"I am Zhongli," the consultant introduced himself. "Of the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor."

"He is our director!" Tsukasa introduced proudly. "Or, well, the consultant. We are currently his assistants in organizing the **Rite of Parting**!"

"Rite of Parting?" Paimon blinked. "You mean... a funeral? For Rex Lapis?"

"Indeed," Zhongli nodded. "The God of Contracts deserves a proper farewell. Childe has kindly offered to fund the endeavor."

Haruka frowned. "Let me get this straight. We are fugitives accused of killing the God. You two were arrested as accomplices. And now... you're planning his funeral? On the Fatui's dime?"

"It is a complex script," Tsukasa admitted. "But the role requires finesse!"

"We have bigger problems," Aether interrupted, stepping forward to face Childe and Zhongli. "We met the Adepti. Moon Carver, Mountain Shaper, Cloud Retainer... and Xiao."

Zhongli’s expression didn't change, but his eyes focused sharply on Aether. "And? How did they receive the news?"

"Badly," Ichika said, her voice shaking. "They were furious. They said the Qixing failed to protect the Emperor. They... they're coming to the harbor."

"To destroy it?" Tsukasa gasped.

"To purge it," Haruka corrected grimly. "They want to take control back from the humans. If they attack... Liyue will be a battlefield."

Silence descended on the bank.

Childe let out a low whistle. "Wow. You guys really don't do things halfway, do you? You went to get a lawyer and accidentally started a war. Impressive."

Zhongli closed his eyes for a moment. He looked like a statue pondering the weight of erosion.

"The Adepti do not act without cause," Zhongli murmured. "They honor their contracts. If they believe the contract of protection has been violated... they will intervene."

He opened his eyes. They were calm. Unnervingly calm.

"However, we have a contract of our own. The Rite of Parting must be completed. If the Adepti arrive and find the city in chaos, without even a proper send-off for their Lord... their rage will be absolute."

He looked at Aether.

"Traveler. And you, Outlanders. You have stirred the hornet's nest. Will you help me finish the preparations? If we can complete the Rite, we may be able to calm the Adepti before they level the city."

"We help," Ichika said immediately. "We can't let the people get hurt."

"Agreed," Haruka nodded. "We're already involved. We might as well see it through."

"Then it is settled," Zhongli stated. "Our next step requires a mechanism to repair the ceremonial items. We need to go to **Guizhong Ballista**."

"Ballista?" Tsukasa asked. "We are bringing siege weapons to a funeral?"

"We are repairing history," Zhongli corrected.

As the group moved to leave, Mafuyu hung back. She watched Zhongli walking ahead—calm, unbothered by the news of impending divine war.

She felt a tug on her sleeve. It was Haruka.

"Mafuyu," Haruka whispered. "Are you okay? You seem... distant."

Mafuyu looked at Zhongli’s back.

"He isn't worried," Mafuyu whispered. "The Adepti are coming to destroy the city. The Fatui are plotting. The Qixing are panicking. But he..."

She narrowed her eyes.

"He looks like he already knows the ending of the play."

Chapter 40: Chapter 26: The Ballista and the Dust of Memory

Location: Mt. Tianheng - The Guizhong Ballista

The hike to Mt. Tianheng was steep, but the view from the pass offered a strategic vantage point over the main road leading to the harbor.

Resting on a wooden platform, overlooking the path, was a massive mechanical device. It looked like a crossbow the size of a carriage, constructed of ancient wood and bronze mechanism.

"Behold," Zhongli gestured with a gloved hand. "The **Guizhong Ballista**."

"It’s huge!" Paimon gasped.

"A siege weapon?" Haruka examined the gears. "For a funeral? Are we expecting the corpse to fight back?"

"It is a ceremonial device," Zhongli corrected gently. "Though in ancient times, it was indeed a weapon of war. It was designed to automatically track and fire upon creatures of the Abyss."

He ran his hand along the weathered wood. His expression softened, his amber eyes looking past the wood and into a memory only he could see.

"It was built by an old friend," Zhongli said softly. "**Guizhong**. The God of Dust."

"A God of Dust?" Ichika asked, leaning on her greatsword.

"She was gentle," Zhongli murmured. "She did not possess great strength like Rex Lapis. Instead, she used wisdom and mechanics to protect her people. She built this ballista to guard the northern pass, so that the people of the Guili Plains could sleep in peace."

Tsukasa stepped forward, his eyes shining. "A defender who uses intellect over brute force! A tragic genius! What happened to her?"

Zhongli paused. He looked at the Glaze Lilies growing wild near the base of the platform.

"She died," Zhongli said simply. "During the Archon War. The dust settled, and the rocks remained."

Mafuyu watched him.

‘He isn't reading from a history book,’ she realized. *‘He sounds like he is mourning a person, not a legend.’*

"Anyway," Zhongli cleared his throat, the emotion vanishing instantly behind his consultant persona. "To use this device for the Rite, we must repair it. It has fallen into disrepair."

"Repair it?" Aether looked at the rusted gears. "We need parts."

"There is a military supply post nearby," Zhongli pointed down the slope. "Though it has been abandoned, spare parts should remain. However..."

He narrowed his eyes.

"It appears we are not the only scavengers today."

Down at the supply post, a group of **Treasure Hoarders** were smashing crates open, looting the ancient mechanisms.

"Hey!" Paimon shouted. "Those belong to the Ballista!"

The Treasure Hoarders looked up. "Witnesses? Get them!"

The Skirmish

"Combat!" Tsukasa declared, drawing his silver sword. "Teyvat Expedition Team, engage!"

"Protect Mr. Zhongli!" Ichika shouted, hefting her claymore.

"Oh, do not worry about me," Zhongli said calmly, folding his arms. "I am merely a consultant. Violence is not in my job description. I shall observe your technique."

He stepped back, finding a nice rock to sit on.

"He's useless in a fight!" Paimon complained.

The Treasure Hoarders charged. There were a dozen of them—Crushers with hammers, Potioneers with elemental flasks, and Gravediggers with shovels.

"Formation!" Haruka ordered.

Tsukasa took the center. He didn't have elemental powers, but he had flair. "HAH!" He parried a shovel strike with his sword, spinning to deliver a kick (infused with a small burst of Anemo from his earlier training) that knocked the thief back.

"Watch the flanks!"

Two Potioneers threw Cryo and Electro cocktails at Ichika.

Ichika didn't dodge. She swung her **Waster Greatsword**. The massive blade acted as a shield, blocking the bottles. They shattered against the steel.

"Too slow!" Ichika gritted her teeth, using the momentum of the heavy sword to swing it in a wide arc. The flat of the blade hit the Potioneers, sending them flying into a stack of crates.

"Behind you!"

A Crusher raised a massive hammer behind Haruka.

Mafuyu moved. She opened her **Apprentice's Notes**. She didn't shout a spell. She just flicked her wrist.

A sphere of compressed air shot out from the book. It hit the Crusher in the chest.

BOOM.

The impact sounded like a cannon shot. The Crusher was launched backward, tumbling down the hill.

"Excellent form," Zhongli commented from his rock. "Though, Miss Asahina, you are applying too much force. A focused burst uses less stamina than a raw explosion."

"Noted," Mafuyu said, not looking at him.

Within minutes, the Hoarders were fleeing.

"Monsters!" one yelled. "They use magic without Visions! Run!"

The Repair

They gathered the spare parts—gears, strings, and a heavy viewing scope.

Back at the platform, Zhongli guided them through the repairs.

"The tension string goes here," Zhongli instructed, pointing to a slot. "Tsukasa, apply leverage."

"Hnnngh!" Tsukasa pulled the heavy lever. "This... mechanism... is... heavy!"

"It requires the strength of a Geovishap," Zhongli noted helpfully. "Put your back into it."

With a final *clank*, the gears locked into place. The Guizhong Ballista shuddered. The dust fell away, revealing the gleaming bronze underneath.

"It is operational," Zhongli nodded, running a hand along the scope. "Though without the elemental power of the Adepti, it cannot fire at full capacity. But for the Rite... it will suffice."

He looked through the scope, aiming it toward the distant horizon.

"She would be happy to know it still works," Zhongli whispered.

"Guizhong?" Ichika asked softly.

"Yes," Zhongli turned away from the machine. "She loved these devices. She believed that with enough ingenuity, humans could stand equal to gods."

He looked at the troupe—Tsukasa wiping sweat from his brow, Haruka checking her spear tip, Ichika resting on her sword, and Mafuyu staring at the sky.

"Perhaps," Zhongli mused. "She was right."

"So," Haruka dusted off her hands. "We have the jade, the perfume, and the ballista is fixed. What's next?"

"The **Everlasting Incense**," Zhongli ticked off the list. "It is the final component. It guides the soul to the afterlife."

"Where do we get that?" Paimon asked.

"**Bubu Pharmacy**," Zhongli said. "It is the finest apothecary in Liyue. We shall head there immediately."

He began walking down the path.

"Wait," Tsukasa checked the Mora bag. He shook it. It made a very sad, empty rattling sound. "Zhongli-san... we have a problem."

"Oh?" Zhongli stopped.

"We are broke," Tsukasa announced. "We have zero Mora. How are we supposed to buy 'Everlasting Incense'?"

Zhongli blinked. He tapped his chin.

"A valid concern," Zhongli admitted. "I suppose we will have to... negotiate."

"Negotiate?" Haruka groaned. "With no money? This is going to be a disaster."

"Don't worry!" Paimon chirped. "Maybe Childe will give us more money!"

"Or maybe," Mafuyu said quietly, following them. "Zhongli-san will just find another person to pay the bill."

Zhongli smiled, enigmatic as ever. "Tradition cannot be measured in coin, Miss Asahina."

"But dinner can," Mafuyu countered.

Chapter 41: Chapter 27: The Zombie, the Crane, and the Cocogoat

Location: Liyue Harbor - Main Street

The sun was beginning to dip, casting long shadows over the harbor. The troupe walked toward the northern district, their pockets depressingly light.

"Everlasting Incense," Tsukasa muttered, checking his empty money pouch. "It sounds expensive. And given our current financial status—which is *zero*—I fear we may have to offer labor instead of Mora."

"We could busk?" Haruka suggested. "Venti seemed to make a decent living doing it."

"Perform on the street?!" Tsukasa gasped. "Without a stage? Without lighting?! ...Well, I suppose a true Star can make the pavement his stage, but it is undignified!"

Zhongli stopped in the middle of the street. He tapped his chin thoughtfully.

"A valid concern," Zhongli admitted. "While I am certain the pharmacy would appreciate the business, we cannot complete the transaction without funds."

He turned to the group.

"You proceed to Bubu Pharmacy. It is located at the top of the stairs in the northern terrace. Introduce yourselves and inquire about the stock."

"What about you?" Ichika asked.

"I shall seek out Childe," Zhongli stated calmly. "He is our... financier. I will secure the necessary funds and meet you there."

"You're leaving us?" Paimon panic-floated. "With no money? What if they charge us for looking at the herbs?!"

"Bubu Pharmacy is a reputable establishment," Zhongli reassured her. "They will not charge you for breathing. Go on. I will return shortly."

With a swirl of his coat, the consultant walked away toward the Northland Bank, leaving the group stranded on the street corner.

"He really just... left," Haruka sighed.

"Well," Aether adjusted his gloves. "Let's go. Maybe we can negotiate a layaway plan."

Location: The Stairway to Yujing Terrace

The stairs to the pharmacy were steep and winding. As they climbed past the lotus ponds, the air grew cooler, smelling of medicinal herbs and wet stone.

"Someone is there," Mafuyu whispered, pointing ahead.

Standing on the landing, staring intensely at a patch of Glaze Lilies growing in a planter, was a woman.

She was striking—long, white hair fading into black, a bodysuit that left little to the imagination, and a gaze that seemed colder than the peaks of Dragonspine.

Shenhe.

She held a stalk of Violetgrass in her hand. As the group watched, she put the raw, bitter flower into her mouth and chewed it stoically.

"Is she... eating the landscaping?" Paimon whispered loudly.

Shenhe stopped chewing. She turned her head slowly. Her eyes—pale and iridescent—locked onto the group. She didn't look friendly. She looked like a predator assessing a threat.

"You," Shenhe said. Her voice was monotone, yet carried an undercurrent of immense power.

Tsukasa froze. "U-Us?"

Shenhe walked down the steps. She ignored Aether. She ignored Tsukasa. She stopped in front of **Haruka**.

She leaned in, sniffing the air around Haruka’s shoulder.

"You smell of the mountains," Shenhe stated. "And of Cloud Retainer's domain. Have you been to Mt. Aocang?"

"We were there this morning," Haruka replied, keeping her composure despite the strange woman invading her personal space. "We met the crane adeptus."

"I see," Shenhe nodded, stepping back. "I am Shenhe. Her disciple."

"Disciple?" Ichika blinked. "You're a human who trains with the Adepti?"

"Yes," Shenhe confirmed. She looked at the Violetgrass in her hand. "I require medicinal herbs. My supply has run low, and the city's flora is... lacking in potency."

"You eat them raw?" Ichika asked, concerned. "Doesn't that hurt your stomach?"

"Pain is irrelevant," Shenhe said. "It sustains the body. However, Cloud Retainer insists I try 'civilized' medicine occasionally. I am heading to the pharmacy."

"We're going there too!" Paimon chirped, sensing an opportunity to have a powerful ally (or at least someone who knew the way). "We can walk together!"

Shenhe looked at Paimon. "A floating child. Is it emergency rations?"

"NO!" Paimon stomped the air. "Why does everyone say that?!"

"Let us proceed," Shenhe turned, walking up the stairs with a deadly graceful stride.

Tsukasa leaned toward Aether. "She is... intense. She reminds me of a samurai from a period drama. The 'Silent Assassin' archetype!"

"She seems lonely," Mafuyu murmured, watching Shenhe's back.

Location: Bubu Pharmacy

They reached the top. The pharmacy was a grand, open-air structure adorned with gourds and scrolls.

However, the counter was empty.

"Hello?" Haruka called out. "Is anyone working?"

Creak.

A small head popped up from behind the counter.

It was a little girl with pale blue hair, a talisman stuck to her forehead, and eyes that looked... dead.

Qiqi.

"Welcome... to Bubu Pharmacy," Qiqi said slowly, her voice devoid of inflection.

"A zombie?!" Tsukasa yelped, jumping back. "The dead walk!"

"I am... a zombie," Qiqi confirmed, tilting her head. "And... I am the clerk. What... do you need?"

"We need **Everlasting Incense**," Aether explained. "It's for a... very important ceremony."

Qiqi blinked. "Everlasting... Incense... Let me check... my notes."

She pulled out a notebook and flipped through it slowly. Painfully slowly.

"Yes. We have it," Qiqi said. "But... Dr. Baizhu is out. I cannot... verify the price."

"Can we buy it anyway?" Paimon asked.

"You can," Qiqi nodded. "But... you must help Qiqi first."

"A quest!" Tsukasa declared. "Name your request, little undead shopkeep! Do you need us to vanquish a ghost? Retrieve a lost soul?"

"No," Qiqi said. "I need... **Coconut Milk**."

Silence filled the pharmacy.

"Coconut... milk?" Haruka repeated.

"Yes," Qiqi nodded. "It is tasty. But... I cannot find the source. The **Cocogoat**."

"The... what?" Aether squinted.

"The Cocogoat," Qiqi explained, as if it were obvious. "It is a legendary adeptibeast. It produces the milk. I need you... to hunt it."

Shenhe, who had been standing silently by a shelf of Qingxin flowers, suddenly turned around. Her eyes narrowed dangerously.

"A Cocogoat?" Shenhe mused. "I have lived in the mountains for many years. I have hunted geovishaps, abyss mages, and demons. But I have never heard of this beast."

She summoned a Cryo spear into her hand, the temperature in the shop dropping.

"It must be a rare, elusive predator," Shenhe declared, her killing intent spiking. "A beast worthy of a hunt. Where was it last seen?"

"Near... the Guizhong Ballista," Qiqi said (making it up based on a vague memory).

"Then we shall go," Shenhe decided instantly. "We will slaughter this Cocogoat and bring its milk to the pharmacy."

"Slaughter?!" Ichika panicked. "Wait, Shenhe-san, maybe we don't need to kill it!"

"It is a hunt," Shenhe stated. "Prey is meant to be hunted."

"Wait a minute," Haruka rubbed her temples. "Coconut milk comes from... coconuts. Not a goat."

"Are you questioning the zombie?" Tsukasa whispered loudly. "She has lived for centuries! Perhaps in ancient times, goats were made of coconuts! This is a high-fantasy world, Kiritani! Logic does not apply!"

"I agree," Shenhe nodded at Tsukasa. "The world is vast. If the Cocogoat exists, I will find it. And I will harvest it."

"This is going to end badly," Aether sighed.

"Well," Paimon shrugged. "We need the incense. And Zhongli isn't back with the money yet. So... Cocogoat hunting it is?"

"To the Ballista!" Tsukasa pointed his sword toward the door. "The Teyvat Expedition Team —plus the Crane Disciple—shall secure the legendary milk!"

Qiqi watched them leave with a blank expression.

"Cocogoat..." Qiqi murmured. "I hope... it tastes good."

Chapter 42: Chapter 28: The Hunt for the Cocogoat

Location: Mt. Tianheng - Near the Guizhong Ballista

The sun beat down on the rocky slopes. The wind whistled through the mechanical limbs of the recently repaired Ballista.

"Shh," Shenhe hissed, crouching low in the tall grass.

The entire group froze. Even Tsukasa held his breath (mostly because Shenhe was terrifying).

"I have located the prey," Shenhe whispered, her eyes locked on a ridge about fifty meters away.

Standing there, chewing casually on a patch of sweet flower, was a goat. A completely normal, slightly chubby, white goat.

"Behold," Shenhe narrowed her eyes, summoning a Cryo talisman in her hand. " The beast. It disguises itself as common livestock to deceive hunters. But it cannot hide its aura."

"It looks like... a goat," Ichika whispered to Aether.

"It is a master of camouflage!" Tsukasa argued in a hushed tone. "Do not be fooled, Hoshino! The Cocogoat is a legendary adeptibeast! It likely has fangs concealed beneath that wool!"

"I shall strike first," Shenhe declared, rising slowly. The air temperature around her dropped twenty degrees. **"Transfiguration: The Homing Soul."**

A massive avatar of a spirit cryo-avatar began to form behind her. She was preparing an ultimate move usually reserved for Abyss Lectors.

"Whoa! Stop!" Haruka jumped in front of Shenhe, waving her hands. "Shenhe-san! That's too much! You're going to vaporize it!"

"If I do not strike with full force, it may escape," Shenhe stated logically. "Prey must be secured."

"Let's just... check it first," Aether suggested, sweating. "Maybe ask it for milk before we freeze it solid?"

Shenhe frowned, but lowered her hand. "Very well. But stay behind me. If it breathes fire, I will execute it."

They approached the goat. The goat looked at them. It bleated. **"Baaaa."**

"It speaks in riddles," Tsukasa noted gravely.

"Okay," Haruka walked up to the goat. It sniffed her hand. It was soft. It was definitely just a goat. "Um... excuse me? Are you a Cocogoat?"

The goat blinked. It turned around and trotted away to eat another flower.

"It ignores us," Shenhe gripped her spear. "Arrogance. It must be a high-ranking beast."

"No," Mafuyu spoke up. She was looking at a fallen coconut shell nearby (likely dropped by a passing merchant, as coconuts didn't grow here). She looked at the goat. Then she looked at the coconut.

"Coconut," Mafuyu pointed to the shell. "Goat," she pointed to the animal.

"Cocogoat," Haruka finished the realization, burying her face in her hands. "Oh no."

"What?" Tsukasa blinked.

"There is no such thing as a Cocogoat," Haruka sighed, the headache setting in. "It's **Coconut Milk**. Qiqi... she thinks the milk comes from a goat. Like cow's milk."

Silence descended on the hillside.

Shenhe stared at the goat. Then at the shell. She processed this information with the speed of a supercomputer crashing.

"So..." Shenhe murmured. "The beast... is a metaphor?"

"It's a misunderstanding," Aether corrected gently.

"I see," Shenhe nodded slowly. The killing intent vanished, replaced by a mild confusion. "Then... I cannot hunt it. How disappointing. I was looking forward to dragging its carcass back to the pharmacy."

"Please don't drag carcasses to a pharmacy," Ichika begged.

Location: Bubu Pharmacy

They returned to the pharmacy as the sun began to set. They were empty-handed, tired, and (in Tsukasa's case) very disappointed that the legendary beast wasn't real.

"We have returned!" Tsukasa announced, marching up to the counter. "Little Zombie! We bring news! The Cocogoat is a myth! A fabrication! A lie of the wind!"

Qiqi blinked slowly from behind the counter. "No... Cocogoat?"

"No," Haruka explained gently. "Qiqi-chan... coconut milk comes from coconuts. They grow on trees. There is no goat involved."

Qiqi stared at Haruka. Her lip trembled slightly.

"But... coconut milk... tastes like... goat milk. But... sweeter."

"That's just the sugar," Paimon sighed.

"Oh," Qiqi looked down at her notebook. She picked up a brush and slowly crossed out a line. "Cocogoat... not... real. Sad."

"Well, this is a predicament," a smooth, slithery voice echoed from the back room. "It seems my little Qiqi has sent you on quite the wild goose chase. Or... wild goat chase, as it were."

A man walked out from the back. He was tall, dressed in green and purple robes, with long green hair and glasses. Draped around his neck was a white snake with red eyes.

Dr. Baizhu. (And **Changsheng** the snake).

"Dr. Baizhu!" Qiqi looked up.

"Greetings," Baizhu smiled. His eyes were snake-like, scanning the group with an intensity that made Mafuyu step back instinctively. "I am Baizhu, the owner of Bubu Pharmacy. And this is Changsheng."

"Hmph. You lot look like you've been rolling in the dirt," the snake hissed.

"A talking snake?!" Tsukasa gasped. "This country is full of surprises!"

"We apologize for the intrusion," Haruka bowed politely. "We are here for the Everlasting Incense."

"Ah, yes. The incense," Baizhu adjusted his glasses. "Qiqi mentioned it. A rare item. Difficult to make. And very expensive."

"We have funding!" A familiar, deep voice boomed from the entrance.

Zhongli strode in, looking calm and composed. "I apologize for the delay. I had to locate Childe to... facilitate the withdrawal."

"Ah, Mr. Zhongli," Baizhu smiled, though the air between them felt charged with a strange, ancient tension. "I haven't seen you in some time. You wish to buy the incense?"

"Indeed," Zhongli nodded. "Price is no object."

"Excellent," Baizhu's grin widened. "Then for you... **three million Mora**."

"THREE MILLION?!" Paimon shrieked. "That's robbery!"

"It is a fair price for quality," Baizhu said smoothly. "Unless... you cannot pay?"

"Childe," Zhongli gestured to the door.

Childe walked in, looking like he had just run a marathon. He was holding a very heavy, very large sack of Mora.

"I'm here," Childe panted, dropping the sack on the counter with a heavy *thud*. "Three million... seriously, Zhongli? You're going to bankrupt the Northland Bank at this rate."

"It is for the Rite," Zhongli said simply.

As Childe counted out the money, Baizhu leaned over the counter, looking past Aether to the four students.

His gaze lingered on **Mafuyu**.

"You," Baizhu murmured. "Your constitution is... fascinating."

Mafuyu looked at him. "I am fine."

"No pulse of the elements within you," Baizhu observed, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. "Yet you carry the scent of Anemo. And... something else. Something hollow."

The snake, Changsheng, flicked its tongue. "She smells like a ghost that hasn't realized it's dead yet."

"Changsheng, don't be rude," Baizhu scolded lightly, though he didn't look away from Mafuyu. "Forgive us. Occupational hazard. If you ever feel... incomplete, do visit us again. I would love to study—I mean, treat you."

"We will keep that in mind," Haruka stepped between Baizhu and Mafuyu, her protective instinct flaring. "We have the incense. We should go."

"Of course," Baizhu smiled. "Qiqi, pack the incense for our guests."

"Okay," Qiqi nodded. "Bye bye... Cocogoat hunters."

Location: Outside the Pharmacy

They walked down the stairs, carrying the box of incense.

"That doctor," Tsukasa shuddered. "He had a very... sinister aura. Like a villain who poisons the hero in the second act!"

"He was creepy," Ichika agreed.

"But we have everything!" Paimon cheered. "Jade, Perfume, Ballista, Incense! We're ready for the Rite!"

"Not quite," Zhongli said, looking at the setting sun. "We have the materials. Now, we must make the announcement. We need to invite the guests."

"Guests?" Aether asked.

"The Adepti," Zhongli said. "And the Qixing. The Rite of Parting is not just a funeral. It is a negotiation table."

He looked at the group.

"Tonight, we dine at **Xinyue Kiosk**. I have booked a table. We shall discuss the final act."

"Does Childe know he's paying for that too?" Haruka asked.

"He will find out," Zhongli smiled.

As they walked away, Shenhe stopped. She looked toward the mountains.

"My task is done," Shenhe said. "I have herbs. I must return to Cloud Retainer."

"You're leaving?" Tsukasa asked. "But the show is about to start!"

"I do not belong in the city," Shenhe said. She looked at Haruka. "You... you are strong. You protect your flock."

She looked at Mafuyu.

"And you. The hollow one. Do not let the city eat you."

With that, Shenhe turned and vanished into the crowd, moving as silently as a ghost.

"She was... cool," Ichika admitted.

"She was terrifying," Tsukasa corrected. "But I suppose every good story needs a mysterious warrior!"

Chapter 43: Chapter 29: The Invitation and the Gathering Storm

Location: Xinyue Kiosk

The private dining room of Xinyue Kiosk offered a panoramic view of the harbor streets below. Usually, this view was a tapestry of lights and laughter.

Tonight, it was a grid of marching iron.

"More guards," Haruka noted, peering through the wooden lattice of the window. She watched a squad of Millelith rush past, their spears gleaming under the streetlamps. "That's the third patrol in ten minutes."

"The city is locking down," Aether said, sipping his tea grimly. "The Qixing are terrified the Adepti are going to attack tonight."

Inside the room, the table was laden with Liyue's finest cuisine—Fullmoon Egg, Golden Crab, and a massive pot of Adeptus' Temptation.

"It is a pity," **Zhongli** sighed, calmly picking up a crab claw with chopsticks. "The atmosphere of Liyue is best enjoyed with the bustle of commerce. This silence... it tastes like iron."

"Can you please not describe the air as tasting like metal?" Tsukasa begged, nervously eyeing the door. "It makes the food harder to swallow! And I am trying to enjoy this Golden Crab!"

"Eat," Mafuyu said quietly to Tsukasa. "If we fight, you need calories."

"Fight?!" Ichika dropped her spoon. "Are we expecting a fight *during* dinner?"

"The storm is approaching," Zhongli said cryptically. "Whether it breaks tonight or tomorrow... the pressure must be released."

He poured himself another cup of tea.

"The Qixing have seized control of the military. The Adepti are gathering at the peaks. Both sides believe they are honoring the Geo Archon's will. It is... a tragic miscommunication."

"Can't we stop them?" Paimon asked. "We know the Adepti! Maybe we can tell them to chill?"

"We are just messengers," Haruka shook her head. "We delivered the news. How they react is up to them."

Suddenly, the sound of heavy boots stopped right outside their private room.

Knock. Knock.

Tsukasa froze. "The Millelith! They found us!"

"Stay calm," Aether whispered, hand drifting to his sword.

The door slid open.

It wasn't the Millelith. It was a woman with blue hair and curved horns, looking exhausted but composed.

Ganyu.

"I apologize for interrupting your meal," Ganyu bowed deeply. "Mr. Zhongli. Traveler. And... guests from afar."

"Miss Ganyu," Zhongli nodded politely. "To what do we owe the pleasure? Surely the Qixing are busy preparing for war."

"It is not war... yet," Ganyu corrected softly, though her eyes were sad. She walked into the room, clutching a sealed envelope. "Lady Ningguang has requested a parley. She wishes to speak with the Traveler."

She placed the envelope on the table. It was heavy, sealed with gold wax and the emblem of the Jade Chamber.

"An invitation," Ganyu explained. "To the **Jade Chamber**."

"The floating palace?" Tsukasa gasped, rushing to the window to look up at the massive structure hovering in the sky. "We are invited *up there*? By the Tianquan herself?"

"She wishes to clear the air," Ganyu said. "She knows you have contacted the Adepti. She believes you are the key to preventing... a catastrophe."

Ganyu turned to look at the troupe.

"Tsukasa Tenma. Mafuyu Asahina. Your house arrest is officially lifted. Lady Ningguang requests your presence as well. She is... curious about the anomalies who walk without Visions."

"Curious is better than hostile," Haruka muttered.

"Wait," Ichika raised a hand. "If we go up there... are we siding with the Qixing against the Adepti?"

"We take no sides," Aether said firmly, picking up the invitation. "We are here to find the truth about Rex Lapis's death. If Ningguang has answers, we'll listen."

"Very well," Ganyu looked relieved. "Please, make haste. The winds are changing. I fear... something old is waking up under the ocean."

She bowed again and left the room, disappearing back into the tense streets.

Zhongli watched the door close. He took a sip of tea.

"The Jade Chamber," Zhongli mused. "Ningguang's pride and joy. It is a fitting stage for the final act."

"You aren't coming?" Mafuyu asked.

"I have preparations to finish for the Rite," Zhongli shook his head. "The incense needs to be burned at the precise hour. You go. I shall await you at the Yujing Terrace when the dust settles."

He stood up, placing a bag of Mora on the table (courtesy of Childe).

"Enjoy the meal. It may be the last quiet moment you have for a while."

Location: The Streets of Liyue

Leaving the restaurant, the tension in the city was palpable. The civilians had cleared out. The streets were lined with Millelith guards, all facing outward toward the harbor entrance and the mountains.

"It feels like a siege," Tsukasa whispered, no longer posturing.

"Look at the sea," Mafuyu pointed.

The ocean, usually calm in the harbor, was churning. Dark waves lapped against the docks. The sky was clear, but the water looked angry.

"Something is wrong," Haruka gripped her spear. "That isn't weather."

"We need to get to the Jade Chamber," Aether said, looking up at the floating palace. "We need to find a way up."

"How?" Ichika asked. "It's in the sky!"

"Paimon remembers!" Paimon snapped her fingers. "The guide said there's a ferryman at Yujing Terrace who knows the password!"

"Password?" Tsukasa's eyes lit up again. "A secret code to enter a sky fortress? This adventure keeps getting better!"

"Let's go," Aether commanded. "Before the storm hits."

As they ran toward the terrace, Mafuyu glanced back one last time at the restaurant. She saw Zhongli sitting alone by the window, drinking his tea while the city prepared for war.

'He is waiting for something,' Mafuyu thought. *'Or someone.'*

Chapter 44: Chapter 30: The Palace in the Clouds

Location: Yujing Terrace - The Guide

"The password?" the ferry lady asked, her face impassive.

Paimon puffed out her chest. "The password is... *'Sell the glazed lilies to the highest bidder'*... wait, no! It's *'The wind blows, the stars shine'*... argh! Aether, what was it?!"

"It was in the invitation," Haruka sighed, handing the envelope to the guide.

The guide inspected the wax seal. "Apologies. Please, step onto the platform."

A floating disc of plaustrite descended. The group stepped on. With a hum of elemental energy, the platform shot upward.

They rose past the rooftops, past the treeline of Mt. Tianheng, until they broke through the cloud layer.

There it was. **The Jade Chamber**.

A floating palace of emerald and gold, suspended in the sky like a second moon.

"Magnificent!" Tsukasa shouted, rushing to the edge (and being pulled back by Ichika). "A stage in the heavens! The acoustics must be divine!"

"It’s certainly... opulent," Mafuyu noted, looking at the floating islands surrounding the main structure. "It looks lonely."

Location: Inside the Jade Chamber

The interior was a maze of expensive wood and paperwork. Secretaries moved with silent efficiency, carrying stacks of documents that dictated the flow of commerce for the entire nation.

At the center of the main hall, standing before a massive wall of research notes, was **Ningguang**.

"Welcome," the Tianquan turned, her expression unreadable. "I have been expecting you."

She walked down the steps, her gaze sweeping over the group.

"The Traveler. And the... anomalies." She looked at Tsukasa and Mafuyu. "I apologize for the Ministry's rough hospitality earlier. Times of crisis demand strict measures."

"We understand," Haruka stepped forward, taking the diplomatic lead. "We are here to listen. Why did you invite us?"

"Because you have seen the truth," Ningguang gestured to the wall of papers. "The Adepti believe the Qixing murdered Rex Lapis to seize power. But they are mistaken."

She picked up a piece of paper—a fatui talisman.

"We hid the Exuvia not to conceal a crime, but to protect it. Our intelligence suggests that the **Fatui** have been researching the **Sigils of Permission**. They are trying to replicate the power of the Adepti."

"Copying the Sigils?" Aether frowned. "Why?"

"To unleash something," Ningguang said grimly. "Or perhaps to bargain with the divine. The Fatui Lord... Childe... has been moving in the shadows."

Mafuyu stiffened. "Childe."

"You know him?" Ningguang asked.

"He paid for our dinner," Tsukasa admitted guiltily.

"He wears a mask," Mafuyu whispered. "He smiles, but his eyes are dead. He is looking for something."

Before Ningguang could respond, the heavy doors of the chamber burst open. A secretary—**Baiwen**—rushed in, looking terrified.

"Lady Ningguang! Urgent report from the Millelith!"

"Speak," Ningguang commanded.

"The **Golden House**!" Baiwen gasped. "The guards have been incapacitated! An intruder has breached the inner sanctum!"

"The Golden House?" Ichika asked.

"It is the mint," Ningguang explained, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "The only place in Teyvat where Mora is struck. But more importantly... it is where we hid the **Exuvia**."

"Rex Lapis's body!" Paimon realized.

"The intruder..." Aether clenched his fists. "It's Childe. He used us to distract the Adepti while he went for the Gnosis."

"He is going to take the Gnosis from the corpse," Haruka realized the plan.

"We must stop him!" Tsukasa drew his sword. "The Teyvat Expedition Team shall—"

"No," Aether cut him off. He looked at the group. He analyzed the situation instantly.

"If Childe is there, it's going to be a high-level fight. But if the Golden House falls, the shockwave will panic the city. The people need to evacuate."

Aether turned to **Haruka** and **Tsukasa**.

"Haruka, Tsukasa. You stay here. Or go down to the city."

"What?!" Tsukasa balked. "But the villain awaits!"

"The people need a leader," Aether said firmly. "Haruka, you know how to organize crowds. Tsukasa, you know how to project your voice and inspire hope. If the fight spills out... the citizens will need you to keep them calm."

Haruka looked at Aether. She understood. This wasn't about sidelining them; it was about damage control.

"Understood," Haruka nodded. "We'll coordinate with the Millelith to secure the harbor streets."

"Very well!" Tsukasa sheathed his sword. "I shall ensure the audience remains safe in their seats! Go, Traveler! Defeat the antagonist!"

Aether turned to **Ichika** and **Mafuyu**.

"Ichika, I need your defense. Mafuyu, I need your... resonance. If Childe uses Abyss power, you might be the only one who can sense it coming."

Ichika gripped her heavy claymore. "I won't let him pass."

Mafuyu nodded once. "I will go."

Ningguang watched the delegation of duties with a hint of admiration.

"Go," Ningguang ordered. "I will mobilize the Qixing to secure the perimeter. Do not let the Fatui desecrate the Lord of Geo."

Location: The Golden House (Entrance)

Aether, Ichika, and Mafuyu sprinted down the path to the Golden House. The massive structure loomed ahead, silent and ominous.

The guards at the entrance were unconscious, knocked out by precise, brutal blows.

"Hydro element," Aether noted, checking a fallen guard. "It’s definitely him."

They pushed the heavy doors open.

The interior was a cavern of gold. Mountains of Mora were piled high, glittering in the dim light. In the center of the room lay the massive, lifeless dragon body of Rex Lapis—the Exuvia.

And standing next to it, admiring the corpse, was a man with orange hair.

"You're late," Childe called out, his voice echoing off the gold.

He turned around. He wasn't smiling anymore. His face was covered by a red Fatui mask.

"I expected you to be faster, Traveler," Childe said, summoning twin daggers made of water. "I went through all the trouble of giving you the Sigil to keep the Adepti busy... and you still kept me waiting."

He looked at Ichika and Mafuyu.

"And you brought the extras. The girl with the big sword... and the one who scratched Signora."

Childe’s eyes locked onto Mafuyu.

"I've been wanting to see what you can do," Childe said, his killing intent flaring like a physical wave. "No Vision... but you smell like the Abyss. Like something... broken."

"I am not broken," Mafuyu said, raising her catalyst.

"We'll see," Childe laughed, the water around him bubbling into jagged spears. "Now... hand over the Gnosis, and I might let you live."

"It's not on us," Aether drew his sword. "And you're not touching the Exuvia."

"Fine," Childe shrugged. "I guess I'll just have to take it from the corpse... *after* I step over yours."

Battle Start.

Chapter 45: Chapter 31: The Golden House

Location: The Golden House - Main Chamber

"Let's dance!"

Childe didn't wait for a signal. He drew his bow, condensing Hydro energy into an arrow.

Twang.

The arrow flew with the force of a ballista bolt, aimed directly at Aether's heart.

"Look out!" Ichika screamed.

She stepped forward, swinging her **Waster Greatsword** like a shield. She planted her feet, bracing for impact.

CLANG.

The water arrow shattered against the flat of the iron blade. The impact skidded Ichika backward three feet, her boots screeching on the gold-covered floor, but she held her ground.

"Heavy!" Ichika gritted her teeth, her arms vibrating from the shock. "He hits harder than the mitachurls!"

"Don't let him keep his distance!" Aether commanded, dashing around Ichika's flank. "Mafuyu, suppressive fire! Ichika, guard us!"

"Understood," Mafuyu opened her **Apprentice's Notes**.

She flipped a page. A volley of compressed air bullets shot toward Childe.

Childe laughed, discarding his bow. "Too slow!"

He materialized twin Hydro daggers, weaving through Mafuyu's wind blasts with fluid grace. He closed the distance to Aether in a heartbeat, clashing blades with a spray of sparks and water.

"You're good, Traveler!" Childe grinned, pressing his weight down on Aether's sword. "But your friends are lagging behind!"

He spun, delivering a roundhouse kick that sent a wave of water crashing toward Mafuyu.

"Shield!" Ichika jumped in, blocking the wave with her body and sword. The water soaked them, heavy and crushing.

"He is playing with us," Mafuyu noted calmly, wiping water from her face. "He hasn't used his Vision fully."

"Then let's make him," Aether yelled. **"Windblade!"**

A vortex of Anemo slammed into Childe, knocking him back.

Phase 2: The Delusion

Childe slid across the floor, correcting his balance. He stood up, wiping a drop of blood from his lip. The smile vanished from his face.

"Not bad," Childe said, his voice dropping an octave. "You're actually making me work for it. Good. Very good."

He reached for the mask on his head. He pulled it down over his face.

The air in the Golden House changed. The smell of ozone filled the room. Violet lightning began to crackle around his body, replacing the blue of Hydro.

"Now... surrender the Gnosis."

FLASH.

He vanished.

"Where did he go?!" Ichika panicked, spinning around.

"Behind you!" Aether shouted.

Childe reappeared in a bolt of purple lightning, wielding a double-bladed Electro polearm. He slammed it down.

Ichika raised her sword, but metal conducts electricity.

ZZAAPP.

"AAAAH!" Ichika screamed as the voltage coursed through her blade and into her arms. She was thrown backward, her muscles seizing up. She hit a pile of Mora, her greatsword clattering away.

"Ichika!" Mafuyu ran toward her.

"Eyes on me!" Childe roared, dashing toward Mafuyu.

Aether intercepted, blocking the spear with his sword. But Childe was faster, stronger, and electrified. He unleashed a flurry of strikes that forced Aether onto the defensive.

"You can't protect everyone, Traveler!" Childe taunted. He used the momentum to vault over Aether, sprinting straight for the **Exuvia**—the dragon corpse in the center of the room.

"The Gnosis!" Childe laughed. "It's mine!"

He plunged his hand into the chest of the dead dragon. He grasped for the divine core.

His hand closed on... nothing.

Childe froze.

He rummaged around. Nothing.

"Empty?" Childe whispered.

He pulled his hand out. It was empty.

Slowly, he turned around. The lightning around him flared violently, cracking the floor tiles.

"You..." Childe pointed a trembling finger at Aether. "You already took it, didn't you? You beat me to it!"

"We didn't take anything!" Aether shouted.

"Don't lie to me!" Childe screamed. The air began to vibrate. Gravity seemed to increase. **"You played me for a fool! Just like Signora!"**

The floor beneath Childe shattered. Dark, abyssal energy erupted from his body, swallowing the Electro and Hydro alike.

Phase 3: The Foul Legacy

The transformation was terrifying. Childe grew in size, clad in cosmic armor of stars and void. A cape of pure energy flowed behind him. He held a massive, double-ended lance that crackled with the power of the Abyss.

The Foul Legacy: The Devouring Deep.

"GET BACK!" Aether yelled, shielding his face from the shockwave.

Childe swung his massive weapon. A tidal wave of Abyssal water crashed into the room.

Aether was swept away, crashing into a pillar. He struggled to stand, coughing water. Ichika was still paralyzed from the electro-shock, barely conscious on the pile of coins.

Only one person was left standing.

Mafuyu Asahina.

She stood in the center of the room, her hair whipping in the chaotic wind of Childe’s aura. She held her catalyst book tight against her chest.

Childe—now a monster—turned his single glowing eye toward her.

"You..." Childe's voice was distorted, a chorus of a thousand drowning souls. **"The broken one. You smell of it too. The Abyss."**

He raised his massive lance.

"Let's see if you break!"

He charged.

It wasn't a fight anymore. It was a massacre. Childe unleashed a barrage of hydro arrows the size of ballista bolts.

Mafuyu ran.

She didn't use a shield. She knew her weak Anemo barrier would shatter instantly against that power. Instead, she used **resonance**.

She could feel the Abyssal energy pulsing from Childe. It felt... familiar. It felt like the Empty Sekai. Cold. Desolate. Hungry.

'Left,' the emptiness whispered.

Mafuyu side-stepped. A massive arrow obliterated the stone where she had been standing a millisecond ago.

'Right.'

She ducked. Childe's lance swept over her head, shearing off a lock of her purple hair.

"You dodge well!" Childe roared, summoning a massive whale of water from the ceiling. **"How about this?!"**

The whale crashed down.

Mafuyu didn't run away from it. She ran *toward* Childe, sliding under the arch of the water as it crashed behind her.

She was inside his guard.

Childe looked down, surprised that the little insect was so close.

Mafuyu looked up at the monster. Up close, the Abyssal armor looked painful. It was eating him alive to sustain this form.

"You are hurting yourself," Mafuyu said calmly.

She placed her hand on his armored chest.

"Burst."

She channeled every ounce of Anemo energy she had—not into a push, but into a *disruption*. She injected a chaotic swirl of wind directly into the flow of his Abyssal energy.

It was like throwing a wrench into a spinning gear.

"GAAAAAH!"

Childe convulsed. The armor flickered. The Abyssal energy recoiled, rejecting the foreign wind. He was blasted backward, crashing into the wall of the Golden House. The impact shook the entire building, causing gold coins to rain from the ceiling.

The armor shattered. The Foul Legacy dissolved.

Childe hit the floor, back in his human form, gasping for air. He was covered in sweat, his face pale.

Mafuyu stood there, panting heavily. Her catalyst book fell from her hand. Her vision blurred. She had used everything.

She collapsed to her knees.

"Not... bad..." Childe wheezed from across the room. He laughed, a pained, wet sound. "You... really are... dangerous."

Aether groaned, pulling himself up from the rubble. He looked at the scene. Childe was down. Mafuyu was down.

"It's over," Aether whispered.

"No..." Childe coughed, forcing himself to stand up, using his bow as a crutch. "I didn't get the Gnosis... and I lost the fight. But... I have a backup plan."

He pulled out several **Sigils of Permission**. Not just one. Dozens.

"If I can't take the Gnosis..." Childe grinned, blood staining his teeth. "I'll make the God come out of hiding to save his precious city."

He threw the Sigils into the air. They glowed, dissolving into golden light that shot through the roof.

"Awaken, Overlord of the Vortex!"

The ground shook. This time, it wasn't an explosion. It was an earthquake.

Outside, in the harbor, the ocean exploded.

Osial, the ancient God of the Vortex, had returned.

Chapter 46: Chapter 32: The Jade Chamber’s Last Stand

Location: Outside the Golden House

The doors of the Golden House burst open. Aether, supporting a limping Ichika, and Mafuyu stumbled out into the open air.

They looked up. And froze.

The sky was black. The ocean had risen like a wall. In the center of the harbor, a colossal hydra made of water and ancient hatred towered over the city.

Osial. Overlord of the Vortex.

"It’s... it’s huge," Ichika whispered, gripping her greatsword despite her trembling hands.

"The Adepti!" Paimon pointed to the sky. "Look!"

Flashback: 10 Minutes Ago (The Jade Chamber)

While Aether battled Childe, the skies above Liyue turned dark.

Cloud Retainer, Moon Carver, and Mountain Shaper descended upon the Jade Chamber, ready to rain judgment upon the Qixing.

"Ningguang!"** Cloud Retainer screeched. **"You hide the Exuvia! You usurp the contract! Explain yourself before we flatten this palace!"

Ningguang stood on the edge of her terrace, Keqing and Ganyu flanking her. She didn't flinch.

"We hide the body to stop the Fatui from desecrating it!" Keqing shouted back, sword drawn. "We are protecting Liyue in our own way!"

Before the argument could turn violent, the ocean exploded. Osial rose.

The arguments died instantly. The Adepti and the Qixing looked at the ancient god, then at each other.

"The Overlord of the Vortex," Moon Carver hissed. "If he breaches the harbor, the people will drown."

Ningguang summoned her catalyst, her face set in stone.

"Then we have a common enemy," Ningguang stated. "We can argue about contracts later. Right now, we fight for Liyue."

"Agreed," *Mountain Shaper boomed.* ***"We shall man the Guizhong Ballistas. Qixing, protect the platform."***

Present Time: The Jade Chamber Platform

Aether, Ichika, and Mafuyu were teleported onto the Jade Chamber's platform via a portal opened by Xiao.

The scene was chaotic. The Adepti had transformed into their beast forms, channeling massive amounts of elemental energy into the three **Guizhong Ballistas** (which had been moved to the floating island).

"Traveler!" Xiao appeared next to them, his mask hanging from his hip. **"You survived the Harbinger. Good."**

"We stopped him," Aether panted. "But he summoned that thing."

"The Ballistas can suppress Osial," Ningguang commanded, floating in the center of a massive Geo formation. "But the Fatui are attacking the platform to destroy them. We need guards."

She looked at Ichika and Mafuyu.

"Can you fight?"

Ichika looked at her shaking hands. She looked at Mafuyu, who was pale and magically exhausted.

"We can't attack," Ichika said, planting her heavy sword into the stone floor. "But we can hold the line."

"Good," Xiao nodded. "Protect the ballistas. I will handle the god."

Location: Liyue Harbor - The Docks

While the gods fought in the sky, the city below was screaming.

Huge waves crashed against the seawalls. Water slimes and Hilichurls, stirred up by the Abyss energy, were swarming the lower districts.

"Move! Move! To the highlands!"

Haruka Kiritani stood atop a crate, her voice projecting clearly over the panic. She wasn't fighting; she was directing.

"Elderly and injured to the Yujing Terrace elevators! Able-bodied men, form a perimeter around the civilians! Don't push!"

"Hey! You heard the lady!"

A girl with dark skin and spiky pigtails strummed a lyre that spat fire. **Xinyan**.

"If you're panicking, you're not listening to the rhythm!" Xinyan shouted, blasting a wave of Pyro that incinerated a group of Cryo slimes blocking the road. "Follow the beat! Move your feet!"

"This way! Orderly fashion!"

A pink-haired woman in a lawyer's hat was ushering a group of merchants. **Yanfei**.

"Article 4 of the Emergency Act states all citizens must evacuate to the nearest high ground!" Yanfei declared, summoning a massive seal of fire to crush a hilichurl. "And you monsters are violating the trespassing laws!"

Tsukasa Tenma was near the bridge, but he wasn't looking at the monsters. He was looking at a group of terrified children huddled behind a cart, crying as the sky turned black.

"Mommy..." one girl sobbed.

Tsukasa gritted his teeth. He sheathed his sword. He didn't need steel right now. He needed a performance.

He jumped onto the railing of the bridge, framing himself against the apocalyptic storm.

"HAHAHA! DO NOT FEAR, LITTLE ONES!"

The children looked up, startled by the booming voice.

Tsukasa struck his signature pose, cape flapping in the gale.

"Do you know what that monster is?" Tsukasa pointed at Osial. "It is merely a special effect! A villain for the World Future Star to defeat!"

"A... villain?" the girl sniffled.

"Yes! And look!" Tsukasa pointed to the Jade Chamber high above. "The heroes are already there! The outcome is written! The heroes always win!"

"Really?" a boy asked.

"Have I ever lied to my audience?!" Tsukasa beamed, giving them a thumbs up. "Now! Let us move to the VIP seats at the top of the hill so we can watch the finale safely! Follow me!"

The children scrambled up, their fear replaced by awe at the weird, loud big brother.

"He's good," a boy with blue hair noted, cutting down a slime with a swift hydro blade. **Xingqiu**.

"He’s loud," his companion, a boy with an ice-blue claymore, sighed. **Chongyun**. "But he’s keeping the negative energy away from the children. It’s effective."

"Chongyun! Xingqiu!" Haruka called out. "Right flank! More slimes!"

"On it!" Xingqiu summoned rain swords. "Let me weave you a verse!"

"Spirit Blade!" Chongyun slammed his claymore down, freezing the water washing over the docks.

Haruka wiped sweat from her forehead. The ground team was holding. But as she looked up at the Jade Chamber, besieged by lightning and rain, her heart hammered.

‘Ichika. Mafuyu. Aether. Please... hang on.’

Location: The Jade Chamber

"INCOMING!" Aether yelled.

A portal opened in the sky. Fatui skirmishers dropped onto the platform—Agents, Cicin Mages, and Skirmishers. They rushed the Ballistas.

"Guizhong Ballista integrity at 80%!" Cloud Retainer shouted, firing a beam of energy at Osial.

A Pyro Agent dashed toward the crane adeptus, knife raised.

"No you don't!" Ichika swung her claymore.

She didn't try to slash him. She used the sword like a baseball bat.

CLANG.

She caught the Agent mid-dash, the impact throwing him off the edge of the floating island.

"Mafuyu!" Ichika yelled. "Left side!"

Mafuyu was kneeling near the center, clutching her catalyst. She was exhausted from the fight with Childe, but she had one thing left.

She felt the Fatui Skirmishers charging up their elemental guns.

‘Disrupt.’

She flicked her hand. A small, condensed sphere of vacuum air shot into the center of the Fatui group.

It didn't hurt them. It just sucked all the air out of their immediate vicinity for two seconds.

The Skirmishers choked, their aim faltering. The elemental shields flickered.

"Now, Xiao!" Aether signaled.

"EVIL CONQUERING!"

Xiao plunged from the sky, a spear of green ruin. He slammed into the disorganized Fatui, the shockwave blowing them off the platform.

But Osial roared.

A massive beam of Hydro energy shot from the god's mouth. It bypassed the Ballistas. It bypassed the Adepti.

It hit the floor of the Jade Chamber.

CRACK.

The entire floating palace tipped violently to the side.

"We're losing altitude!" Ningguang shouted, struggling to maintain the Geo formation. "The Ballistas aren't enough! We can't pierce his regenerative ability!"

She looked at the massive God of the Vortex. Then she looked at her palace—her life's work.

Ningguang's eyes hardened.

"Traveler," Ningguang said calmly. "I have a new plan. But I will need you to make the final strike."

She looked at the Jade Chamber.

"I am going to drop it."

Chapter 47: Chapter 33: The Star That Fell into the Sea

Location: The Jade Chamber

"I will sacrifice the Jade Chamber."

The words hung heavy in the electrified air. Ningguang didn't look at her palace—her life's work, her pride, her symbol of power. She looked only at the monster threatening her people.

"Traveler!" Ningguang commanded, her voice cutting through the roar of the storm. "I will overcharge the floatation core. You must strike it down! Drive it into the heart of the god!"

"Got it!" Aether gritted his teeth.

"We shall lend you our strength!" Moon Carver bellowed.

The Adepti roared in unison. A surge of golden, green, and blue energy rushed into Aether. He glowed with the power of the illuminated beasts, his sword humming with terrifying pressure.

"Everyone! Evacuate!" Aether yelled. "Get off the platform!"

"Ichika! Move!" **Keqing** shouted, slicing through a Fatui agent to clear the path. "The floor is collapsing!"

Ichika tried to run, but the platform lurched violently as the core destabilized. She slipped, her heavy claymore dragging her down toward the crumbling edge.

"Ichika-chan!"

Aether didn't hesitate. Empowered by Xiao's Anemo speed, he vanished in a blur of teal light.

He reappeared at the edge of the collapsing platform, grabbing Ichika's hand just as the stone beneath her crumbled into the abyss. He hauled her against his chest, deploying his wind glider with a snap of canvas.

"Hold on!" Aether shouted.

Mafuyu was further away. She had been disrupting the Fatui until the very last second. When the order came, she was too exhausted to run. She simply looked up at the falling debris, her catalyst slipping from her numb fingers.

'Falling,' she thought. *'Again.'*

She tumbled off the edge into the freefall.

"Foolish child."

A massive white shape swooped down from the storm clouds. **Cloud Retainer**.

The crane Adeptus didn't use her talons; she used a gust of gentle wind to cradle the falling girl, catching Mafuyu on her back amidst the soft feathers.

"One shall not permit you to perish after such a display," Cloud Retainer huffed. **"Hold tight."**

The Impact

Aether plunged downward, driving his sword into the overloaded core of the Jade Chamber.

"GOODBYE!"

With a final thrust, he kicked off the structure.

The Jade Chamber fell.

It fell like a meteor, a burning star of emerald and gold. It screamed through the air, trailing fire and Geo energy.

Osial looked up. The hydra roared, trying to summon a wave to block it, but it was too late.

BOOOOOOOOOM.

The impact was blinding. A mushroom cloud of nuclear proportions erupted in the middle of Liyue Harbor. The shockwave flattened the waves, vaporized the rain, and sent a wall of wind blasting through the city streets.

Then... silence.

The god was gone. The palace was gone. Only the churning, frothing sea remained.

Location: Liyue Harbor - The Docks

The civilians cowered behind crates and inside buildings, terrified by the explosion.

Tsukasa Tenma stood on the highest point of the harbor bridge. He shielded his eyes against the fading light of the explosion.

He scanned the sky. Smoke. Clouds. Debris.

"Where are they?" Haruka whispered, standing next to him, her knuckles white as she gripped the railing. "I don't see them."

"Wait..." Tsukasa squinted.

A golden light pierced the smoke.

From the heavens, a fleet descended. The Adepti—Moon Carver, Mountain Shaper, and Cloud Retainer—flew in formation. Xiao darted between them like a green flash.

And riding the wind currents alongside them were the gliders.

"THERE!" Tsukasa roared, pointing to the sky.

He didn't just speak to Haruka. He projected his voice to the entire cowering city.

"LOOK TO THE SKIES, PEOPLE OF LIYUE!" Tsukasa bellowed, throwing his arms wide. **"THE CURTAIN HAS NOT FALLEN ON A TRAGEDY! IT HAS RISEN ON A VICTORY!"**

The civilians peeked out. They saw the shapes descending.

"THE HEROES RETURN!" Tsukasa shouted, leaping onto the railing. **"THE GOD OF THE VORTEX IS DEFEATED! YOUR CITY STANDS!"**

A single cheer started from the crowd. Then another. Then a roar.

"They did it!" "The Adepti saved us!" "And the Qixing!"

As the adrenaline took over the crowd, the heroes landed on the wooden docks.

Aether collapsed, exhausted. Xiao landed silently on a lamppost. Cloud Retainer landed gracefully, allowing Mafuyu to slide off her back.

"Mafuyu!"

Haruka didn't wait. She vaulted over the railing and sprinted down the dock. She slammed into Mafuyu, hugging her tightly.

"You're safe," Haruka gasped, burying her face in Mafuyu’s shoulder. "I thought... when the chamber fell..."

Mafuyu stood there, blinking. She felt Haruka’s trembling. She looked at Cloud Retainer, who nodded once before flying off to join the other Adepti.

"I am... returned," Mafuyu said softly.

"Ichika!" Tsukasa ran to the blonde girl, who was sitting on the ground trying to catch her breath. "And the Traveler! A magnificent performance! The climax was... explosive! Literally!"

"We made it," Ichika laughed breathlessly, looking up at Tsukasa. "We actually made it."

Ningguang landed last, stepping off her floating platform. She looked at the empty spot in the sky where her Jade Chamber used to be. A flicker of pain crossed her face, but she smoothed it over instantly.

She turned to the gathered Adepti and the Qixing.

"The threat is vanquished," Ningguang announced. "Liyue is safe."

The cheer that went up from the harbor was deafening. It wasn't the polite applause of a theater; it was the raw, emotional roar of thousands of people who had just survived the apocalypse.

Tsukasa watched them. He saw the relief on the children's faces. He saw the tears of joy.

‘This,’ Tsukasa thought, a genuine smile spreading across his face. *‘This is the best standing ovation I have ever seen.’*

Chapter 48: Chapter 34: The Rite of Parting

Location: Bubu Pharmacy

The smell of herbal medicine was sharp and grounding, a stark contrast to the ozone and sea salt of the battle.

"Hold still," **Dr. Baizhu** instructed, applying a cool, green poultice to Ichika's bruised arm. "The electrical burns from the Golden House have inflamed your meridian channels. It will sting."

Ichika hissed in pain but nodded. "I can take it."

"You are all remarkably durable for civilians," Baizhu noted, his snake **Changsheng** flicking its tongue near Ichika's ear. "Though reckless. Fighting a Harbinger and an Ancient God in the same day? Most Vision holders would be dead."

He moved to **Mafuyu**. She was sitting on a stool, staring at the wall. She wasn't physically injured from the Osial fight (thanks to Cloud Retainer), but her energy was dangerously low.

Baizhu placed two fingers on her wrist to check her pulse. His eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

"Your constitution remains... an enigma," Baizhu murmured. "You channeled enough Anemo energy to disrupt a Foul Legacy transformation, yet your body holds no elemental trace. It is like pouring water into a bottomless cup."

"Is she okay?" Haruka asked, hovering protectively.

"She is empty," Baizhu said simply. "But stable. Rest and proper diet will restore her stamina. However..."

He looked at the group with a serious expression.

"Take care of yourselves. Liyue is safe, but you have stepped into a world of gods and monsters. The next time you push your bodies this far... there may be nothing left to heal."

"We understand," Haruka bowed. "Thank you, Doctor."

"Bye bye," Qiqi waved from the counter. "Don't... hunt... non-existent... goats."

Location: Yujing Terrace

Bandaged and rested, the troupe made their way to Yujing Terrace.

The sun was high. The site of the Rite of Descension had been cleaned up. The "corpse" of the dragon was gone, hidden away by the Qixing. In its place, the stage was set for the **Rite**

of Parting.

It was perfect.

The Noctilucous Jade they had bought glowed with a deep, mournful blue. The Silk Flower perfumes wafted through the air, creating an atmosphere of solemn reverence. The Guizhong Ballista stood guard in the distance as a symbolic protector.

"It looks... beautiful," Tsukasa admitted, walking among the decorations. "A stage fit for a legend. We did good work!"

"It’s ready to begin," Aether noted. "But... where is the host?"

They looked around. The Terrace was filling with people coming to pay respects—Ningguang, Keqing, Ganyu—but the man who had orchestrated every detail of this funeral was nowhere to be seen.

"Zhongli isn't here," Ichika said, checking the incense burner. "He said he would meet us."

"Maybe he went to get food?" Paimon guessed. "He does like to eat."

"The ceremony starts in twenty minutes," Haruka frowned, checking the position of the sun. "He wouldn't be late to his own production. He’s obsessed with 'order'."

She tapped her chin, thinking.

"If he isn't here... maybe he's at the **Liuli Pavilion**? or **Xinyue Kiosk**? He seemed to enjoy the view there."

"Let's check," Tsukasa said. "We cannot start the finale without the director!"

Location: The Streets of Liyue

They ran down the stairs to the dining district. They checked Liuli Pavilion. Empty. They checked Xinyue Kiosk. Also empty.

"Where could he be?" Paimon stomped the air.

"There," Mafuyu pointed.

Through the crowd, they caught a glimpse of a long brown coat turning the corner—not toward a restaurant, but up the stairs leading to the **Northland Bank**.

"The Bank?" Aether frowned. "Why would he go back to Childe? Childe just tried to drown the city!"

"Maybe he is negotiating the final bill?" Tsukasa guessed. "The expenses *were* astronomical."

"Let's follow him," Haruka decided. "Something feels off."

Location: Northland Bank

They pushed the heavy doors open. The lobby was empty of customers. The receptionist was gone.

They walked up the stairs to the VIP lounge. The door was ajar. Voices drifted out.

"You played us," a furious voice snarled. **Childe**.

"It was a contract," a calm, deep voice replied. **Zhongli**.

"And you..." a cold, feminine voice sneered. "You certainly took your time, Morax."

Signora.

The group froze.

"Signora?!" Paimon gasped.

They burst into the room.

The scene was tense. Childe was standing by the window, looking furious and betrayed. Signora was lounging on a chair, looking smug. And standing in the center of the room, calm as a mountain, was Zhongli.

"Traveler," Zhongli acknowledged them without turning his head. "And the troupe. You have arrived."

"Zhongli!" Aether summoned his sword. "Get away from her! She's a Harbinger!"

"I know," Zhongli said.

He reached into his chest. A golden light began to glow—a light far brighter and heavier than any Vision. He pulled out a chess piece that pulsed with the power of Geo.

The Gnosis.

"Here," Zhongli said, holding it out to Signora. "The contract is fulfilled."

Signora stood up, taking the Gnosis with a gloved hand. She smiled—a cruel, victorious smile. "The Tsaritsa will be pleased. You are a man of your word, *Rex Lapis*."

Silence. Absolute, shattering silence.

Tsukasa’s jaw dropped so low it nearly hit the floor.

"Rex... Lapis?" Tsukasa whispered.

He looked at the man who had forgotten his wallet. The man who had lectured them on the quality of rocks. The man who had critiqued the perfume for his own funeral.

"YOU?!" Tsukasa shrieked, pointing a shaking finger at Zhongli. "YOU ARE THE GOD?!"

"I *was* the God of Geo," Zhongli corrected calmly. "Now, I am merely Zhongli, a consultant."

"You..." Childe turned on him, his face red with anger. "You tricked me! You used me to summon Osial just to test Liyue's defenses?!"

"It was necessary," Zhongli said. "I needed to know if Liyue could stand without me. If the Qixing and the Adepti could protect the city. You provided the... catalyst."

"I was a pawn!" Childe shouted.

"You were a very expensive pawn," Haruka muttered, still processing the sheer absurdity of it.

Signora ignored Childe’s tantrum. She tucked the Gnosis away. Then, her eyes drifted past Aether. They landed on **Mafuyu**.

The air in the room dropped ten degrees.

"You," Signora hissed.

She touched her cheek. The scratch Mafuyu had left in Mondstadt was gone, healed by magic, but the memory was clearly fresh.

Mafuyu met her gaze. She didn't flinch. She felt the heavy claymore Ichika was holding, and the presence of Zhongli (a god) in the room.

"You are still arrogant," Mafuyu said quietly.

Signora’s eyes flashed with murder. "If we were not in a bank under a diplomatic truce, little rat, I would turn you into an ice sculpture."

"Now, now," Zhongli stepped between them. His voice was polite, but the weight of the earth seemed to settle on the room. "The contract is concluded, Signora. No violence in the harbor. That was part of the deal."

Signora glared at Zhongli, then at Mafuyu. She scoffed, turning her back.

"Come, Tartaglia. We are leaving. We have what we came for."

Childe stormed out, glaring at Zhongli as he passed. "This isn't over, Morax. Next time, we fight for real."

Signora swept past the group. As she passed Mafuyu, she leaned in.

"Pray we do not meet in Inazuma," Signora whispered. "The Shogun is not as... retired... as this one."

The Fatui left.

The door clicked shut.

Zhongli let out a long sigh, his shoulders relaxing.

"It is done," he said.

"Zhongli-san!" Tsukasa marched up to him. He looked like he was about to explode. "You... You made us organize your own funeral! You made me haggle for jade! You... You critiqued the script of your own death!"

"It was a unique experience," Zhongli admitted with a faint smile. "To hear one's own eulogy while eating shrimp balls... it provides a certain perspective."

"Perspective?!" Tsukasa grabbed his head. "I... I don't know if I should be angry or impressed! This is the greatest method acting I have ever seen!"

"Why did you give it up?" Aether asked, looking at where the Gnosis had been. "You were the oldest Archon."

Zhongli walked to the window, looking out at the harbor he had built six thousand years ago.

"I have watched this city for a long time," Zhongli said softly. "But even stone erodes. I was tired, Traveler. And after seeing the humans defeat Osial today... I know my time is over."

He turned back to them.

"Liyue belongs to the humans now. To the Qixing. To the merchants. To people like you."

He looked at the PJSK troupe.

"You are Outlanders. You drift between worlds. You remind me that even contracts have boundaries."

"Does this mean you can't send us home?" Ichika asked, her voice small.

Zhongli shook his head.

"I have stepped down. I no longer have the authority of the Gnosis to tear the firmament."

The hope in the room died.

"But," Zhongli added. "There is one who still rules with absolute authority. Across the sea. **Baal**. The Raiden Shogun of Inazuma."

"Inazuma," Haruka repeated. "The locked nation."

"Yes," Zhongli nodded. "She pursues Eternity. Perhaps... she has found a way to stop time, or reverse it. If anyone can send you back... it is her."

"Then we go to Inazuma," Tsukasa declared, though his voice was a little less boisterous than usual. "After... we recover from the fact that we just served tea to a God."

Zhongli chuckled.

"Speaking of tea... since I am no longer a God, I appear to be... temporarily short on funds."

He looked at Tsukasa with a hopeful expression.

"Mr. Tenma... would you happen to have enough for a final celebratory dinner? I hear Xinyue Kiosk has fresh bamboo shoots."

Tsukasa stared at the former God of Wealth. He looked at his empty wallet.

He screamed.

"YOU ARE UNBELIEVABLE!"

Chapter 49: Chapter 34.5: The Weight of Stone

Location: Sea of Clouds - Statue of The Seven

The adrenaline of the Rite of Parting had finally faded, leaving the group standing on a high ridge overlooking Liyue Harbor. The sun was setting, painting the stone forest in shades of amber.

"You know," Tsukasa said, sheathing his silver sword. "I just realized something. A glaring plot hole in our otherwise spectacular performance."

"What is it?" Haruka asked, wiping dust from her spear.

Tsukasa pointed at the massive, towering statue of Rex Lapis ahead of them—the **Statue of The Seven**.

"We have been in the Land of Rock for weeks. We fought a Harbinger. We dropped a palace on a god. But we are all..." Tsukasa gestured to the troupe, and then at Aether. "...still stuck on 'Wind Mode'."

Aether blinked. He looked at his hand. He summoned a small swirl of Anemo.

"You're right," Aether realized. "We were so focused on getting to the harbor because Venti told us to hurry... and then everything with the assassination happened... we never stopped to resonate."

"We skipped the tutorial," Mafuyu summarized flatly.

"Exactly!" Tsukasa declared. "How can we claim to be the Teyvat Expedition Team if we haven't even mastered the local element? We must rectify this immediately!"

The Resonance

They gathered around the statue. It depicted Rex Lapis seated on a throne, radiating a heavy, stable warmth—very different from the playful breeze of the Mondstadt statues.

"I'll go first," Aether said. "To test if it works the same way."

He stepped forward and placed his hand on the cold stone.

Thrum.

The turquoise glow on Aether’s armor faded, replaced instantly by a deep, pulsing amber light. He flexed his hand, and a small meteorite materialized, floating above his palm.

"Geo," Aether confirmed, feeling the weight of the element. "It feels... heavier. More stable."

"Ooh! Do Paimon next! Wait, Paimon doesn't have elements..." Paimon drooped.

"Our turn!" Tsukasa marched up. "Grant me the power of the earth! I shall build a stage that never crumbles!"

He slapped the statue.

BOOM.

A massive stone stele (a small pillar) erupted from the ground next to him, nearly knocking him over. The shockwave of Geo energy resonated with him.

"Aha! A prop!" Tsukasa cheered, leaning against his new pillar. "I can use this for dramatic monologues! It is a literal spotlight platform!"

Ichika went next. She placed her hand on the stone.

She gasped. It didn't feel like a breeze. It felt like a heavy cloak being placed on her shoulders. Her **Waster Greatsword** suddenly felt lighter in her hands—not because the sword changed, but because her stance became immovable.

"It feels..." Ichika planted her feet. The dust around her crystallized into a translucent golden shield. "Solid. Like I can take a hit."

"Perfect for a tank," Haruka noted. She touched the statue next.

The Geo energy swirled around her spear. She spun the weapon, and the ground beneath her rippled. Small stone ridges rose up, waiting to be unleashed.

"It’s precise," Haruka analyzed. "It requires structure. Rhythm. Unlike Anemo, you can't just throw it. You have to place it."

Finally, Mafuyu.

She reached out. Her Anemo power had been a vacuum—taking things away. When she touched the Geo statue, she felt... filled. It felt like sediment settling at the bottom of a lake.

She didn't summon a shield or a pillar. She simply felt the ground beneath her feet.

"It is heavy," Mafuyu whispered. "But... it stops me from floating away."

"Well," Paimon clapped. "Now you guys are dual-elemental! That's super rare! Almost as rare as finding a chest without a cabbage in it!"

The Downtime

"So," Aether said, testing his new Geo powers by juggling small rocks. "We need to find a way to Inazuma. Zhongli mentioned the **Alcor**—Captain Beidou's ship. But she's currently out at sea."

"We have to wait?" Ichika asked.

"A few days, at least," Aether nodded. "We've been running non-stop since we fell from the sky. Maybe... we should take a break?"

Haruka looked at the group. They were exhausted. They had fought gods, a Harbinger, and the economy.

"A break sounds efficient," Haruka agreed. "We can split up to cover more ground, gather supplies, and... rest."

"Splendid idea!" Tsukasa declared. "I, for one, wish to explore the cultural arts of this nation! I heard rumors of a famous opera singer and a rock musician!"

"I want to check the harbor," Ichika said. "Maybe train a bit more with Aether? I need to get used to this Geo shield. It feels different from the wind barrier."

"I'll help you," Aether smiled. "I need to practice with Geo too. It's been a while."

"I..." Mafuyu hesitated. "I will go with Tsukasa-senpai. He will get lost if he wanders alone."

"I do not get lost!" Tsukasa protested. "I merely take creative detours!"

Haruka smiled. "Then I'll look into the local music scene. I saw a poster for a performance at the Heyu Tea House."

"It's decided then!" Paimon cheered. "Team Break Time is a go!"

Chapter 50: Chapter 35.1: The Sword and the Traveler

Location: Mt. Tianheng - Lower Ridge

CLANG.

The heavy iron blade of the **Waster Greatsword** slammed into the rocky ground, sending tremors through Ichika's arms. She staggered, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"It's... too heavy," Ichika panted, leaning on the hilt. "I can't swing it fast enough. By the time I lift it, the enemy would have already hit me."

Aether sat on a nearby rock, holding a waterskin. He wasn't judging her; he was observing.

"You're fighting the weight," Aether said, standing up. "You're trying to lift it like it's a katana or a prop. But a claymore isn't just a sword. It's a pendulum."

He walked over to her. He didn't take the sword; he adjusted her stance.

"Widen your feet. Use your hips, not your shoulders. When the sword moves, you move *with* it. Don't stop the momentum. Redirect it."

Ichika nodded, adjusting her grip. She lifted the blade again. It felt like trying to lift a car.

"I usually play guitar," Ichika admitted with a self-deprecating smile. "The heaviest thing I carry is an amp case. This is... a different kind of heavy."

"Think of it like a song," Aether suggested.

Ichika blinked. "A song?"

"Battle has a rhythm," Aether explained. He summoned a small Geo rock in his hand, tossing it up and catching it. "Attack. Dodge. Block. Attack. It's a 4/4 beat. If you rush the tempo, you trip. If you drag, you get hit."

Ichika looked at the sword. *Rhythm.*

She closed her eyes. She imagined the beat of a Leo/need song. A driving bassline.

One, two, three, four.

She lifted the sword on *one*. She swung on *two*. Instead of stopping the blade when it hit the ground, she pivoted her hips on *three*, using the bounce to lift it back up for *four*.

Whoosh.

The blade sliced the air with surprising speed.

"Better," Aether smiled. "Now, add the Geo."

Training: The Shield

"I'm going to throw rocks," Aether warned, distancing himself. "Don't dodge. Block."

"Block rocks?!" Ichika gripped her sword.

"You're a tank now, Ichika," Aether reminded her. "Trust the stone."

Aether stomped his foot. **"Starfell Sword!"**

A large chunk of Geo energy materialized and hurtled toward her. It wasn't lethal speed, but it would definitely leave a bruise.

Ichika's instinct was to run. But she remembered the Golden House. She remembered blocking the lightning for Haruka.

'Protect.'

She planted her feet. She didn't swing. She slammed the flat of the blade in front of her like a wall.

Thrum.

The Geo energy inside her resonated with the sword. A translucent, golden crystal shield formed instantly over the metal.

BOOM.

The rock shattered against the shield. Ichika slid back a few inches, but she didn't fall. The shield held.

"I... I did it," Ichika gasped, looking at the golden barrier fading around her.

"Crystallize," Aether nodded approvingly. "When Geo meets an element, it creates a shield. As long as you stand your ground, you're invincible."

The Break

They sat on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the harbor. The sun was warm on their backs.

"You're getting the hang of it," Aether said, handing her an apple.

"Thanks to you," Ichika took a bite. "I never thought I'd be fighting monsters. Back home... my biggest worry was whether Saki would get sick again, or if Honami was overworking herself."

She looked at the horizon.

"Aether-san... you're looking for your sister, right?"

Aether’s expression softened. "Yeah. Lumine."

"Do you..." Ichika hesitated. "Do you ever get scared that... she might have changed? That when you find her, she won't be the person you remember?"

Aether looked down at the dull blade on his hip. He thought about the Abyss Herald he had fought. He thought about the nightmares.

"I do," Aether admitted quietly. "People change. Worlds change us. But..."

He looked at Ichika.

"She's my sister. Even if she's different... even if she's forgotten me... I won't stop reaching out. Because the bond we share is stronger than time."

Ichika nodded slowly. She thought of her band. They had drifted apart once. They had hurt each other. But they had found their way back through music.

"You're right," Ichika smiled. "We just have to keep playing the song until they hear it."

She stood up, dusting off her skirt. She grabbed the massive sword. It didn't feel quite so heavy anymore.

"One more round?" Ichika asked, a new fire in her eyes. "I want to try combining the shield with a swing."

Aether grinned, summoning his Geo power.

"Let's go. Don't lose the beat."

Chapter 51: Chapter 35.2: The Mask and the Mirror

Location: Liyue Harbor - Feiyun Slope

The streets of Liyue were alive with the mid-afternoon rush. Merchants shouted over each other, selling silk, spices, and stone.

Tsukasa Tenma marched through the crowd, a man on a mission.

"We must find the perfect souvenir!" Tsukasa declared, stopping in front of a toy stall. "When we return to Japan, I cannot show up empty-handed! Saki expects a tale of adventure, and a physical token to prove it!"

Mafuyu followed a few paces behind, her hands clasped in front of her. She watched Tsukasa pick up a porcelain doll, inspect it critically, and put it down.

"Too fragile," Tsukasa muttered. "Saki would break it in her excitement."

He moved to a kite stall. "Too cumbersome for interdimensional travel!"

He moved to a snack vendor. "Perishable! Useless!"

Mafuyu watched him spiral.

"Tsukasa-senpai," Mafuyu said quietly. "You are overthinking it."

"I am not overthinking!" Tsukasa turned, holding a bamboo dragonfly. "I am curating! A Star must always deliver the best performance, even in gift-giving!"

He sighed, putting the toy down. His shoulders slumped, the energetic persona cracking just a fraction.

"I just... I want her to know I was thinking of her. That I didn't forget her while I was busy fighting dragons."

Mafuyu looked at him. She saw the genuine worry in his eyes.

"You miss her," Mafuyu stated.

"Of course I do!" Tsukasa exclaimed softly. "She is my sister. My number one fan."

They walked in silence for a moment, drifting toward a stall selling opera masks—intricate, painted faces used in Liyue’s traditional theater.

Tsukasa stopped. He picked up a mask painted with fierce red and black stripes—a hero's face.

"A mask," Tsukasa murmured, running his thumb over the painted wood.

"You wear one too," Mafuyu said.

It wasn't an accusation. It was an observation.

Tsukasa froze. He lowered the mask, looking at Mafuyu.

"What do you mean?"

"You are always loud," Mafuyu said, her empty eyes boring into him. "You pose. You shout. You declare yourself a Star. Even when we were in prison. Even when the dragon attacked."

She stepped closer.

"But your hands shake. And sometimes, when you think no one is looking... you look tired."

Tsukasa gripped the wooden mask. He looked at his reflection in a polished bronze mirror on the stall counter. He saw the "World Future Star." And he saw the scared teenager underneath.

"It is a role," Tsukasa admitted, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Saki... she was sick for a long time. The hospital room was always so quiet. So sad."

He looked at the mask.

"I decided I would be loud enough to chase the quiet away. If I smiled, she would smile. If I was confident, she wouldn't be afraid. So I put on the mask of the Star."

He looked at Mafuyu.

"Is that... dishonest?"

Mafuyu stared at the mask in his hands.

"I wore a mask too," Mafuyu said. "The 'Good Girl'. I studied. I smiled. I did everything Mother wanted. I became exactly what she asked for."

She touched her own cheek.

"But my mask was empty. I wore it to hide. To disappear."

She looked at Tsukasa.

"You wear yours to be seen. To protect her."

Mafuyu reached out and touched the red-painted mask in Tsukasa’s hands.

"Your mask is warm," Mafuyu whispered. "Mine was cold."

Tsukasa stared at her. He saw the crack in her perfect, doll-like demeanor. He realized that while he acted to fill the room, she acted to leave it.

He smiled. It wasn't his stage smile. It was a gentle, brotherly smile.

"Then let us find a mask that fits you," Tsukasa said.

He scanned the stall. He bypassed the smiling masks and the angry masks. He found a simple, white mask with delicate purple flower patterns. It was elegant, mysterious, but distinct.

He held it up to her face.

"This one," Tsukasa decided. "It isn't empty. It is waiting for a story."

He placed it in her hands.

"You are learning to feel again, Asahina. Anger. Confusion. Hunger. Eventually... you will fill this mask with your own face."

Mafuyu looked at the mask. She traced the purple flowers.

"My own... face," she repeated.

"Hey! Are you buying those or just staring at them?" the shopkeeper barked.

"Ah! We shall take them!" Tsukasa declared, reaching for his money pouch. He poured out the last few coins from the Childe stipend. It was just enough.

"A hero mask for Saki," Tsukasa grinned, tucking the red mask into his bag. "And a mystery mask for you."

"For me?" Mafuyu blinked. "But... I have no money."

"Consider it a gift from the troupe leader!" Tsukasa struck a pose (summoning a small Geo stele next to him to prop his foot up on). "A prop for your character development!"

Mafuyu looked at the mask. Then she looked at Tsukasa, who was struggling to balance on his rock.

A tiny, almost imperceptible smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"You really are... a strange person, Senpai."

"I am a Star!" Tsukasa corrected, jumping down. "Now come! I smell grilled tiger fish! My Geo powers require sustenance!"

As they walked away, Mafuyu held the mask tight against her chest.

It felt solid. Real.

‘A mask to protect,’ she thought. *‘Not to hide.’*

Chapter 52: Chapter 35.3: The Stage of Rock and Silk

Location: Heyu Tea House

The Heyu Tea House was packed. The air smelled of jasmine tea and roasted nuts.

Haruka Kiritani stood at the back of the room, her posture perfect, her blue eyes locked on the stage.

On the platform, a young woman with elaborate headwear and a dress of silk and feathers was performing. She moved with fluid, hypnotic grace, spinning a spear as if it were a ribbon. Her voice soared, hitting notes that resonated with the very timber of the building.

Yun Jin. The Director of the Yun-Han Opera Troupe.

'Her breath control is flawless,' Haruka analyzed, her professional mode fully engaged. *'Every movement is calculated. She doesn't waste a single millimeter of motion. It's... beautiful.'*

The song ended. The audience erupted into polite, appreciative applause. Yun Jin bowed, her expression serene and elegant.

"Bravo!" a rough, scratchy voice shouted from the balcony. "Now play something with a beat!"

The crowd gasped.

A girl leaped down from the railing. She had dark skin, spiky pigtails, and a drum on her back. She landed on the stage with a heavy *thud*, striking a power chord on a lyre that was modified to look like an axe.

Xinyan.

"Opera is great, Yun Jin!" Xinyan grinned, fire sparks dancing around her. "But this crowd is falling asleep! Let's wake 'em up with some Rock 'n' Roll!"

"Miss Xinyan," Yun Jin sighed, though she smiled affectionately. "We discussed this. The tea house is not structurally sound enough for your pyrotechnics."

"Details!" Xinyan laughed. She looked at the crowd. "Who wants to hear the soul *burn*?!"

The older patrons looked terrified. The younger ones looked intrigued.

Haruka watched them. The contrast was jarring—elegance vs. chaos. Tradition vs. rebellion.

'And yet,' Haruka thought. *'They are both shining.'*

She couldn't help herself. She stepped forward.

"Excuse me."

The room turned to look at her. Haruka walked up to the stage. She wasn't wearing a costume, just her school uniform and her new iron spear strapped to her back. But she walked with the confidence of someone who had performed in front of thousands.

"You both have incredible presence," Haruka said, bowing politely. "But if you combine your rhythms... you wouldn't have to choose between waking them up or soothing them."

Yun Jin tilted her head. "Oh? And you are?"

"Haruka Kiritani," she introduced herself. "I am... a performer. From far away."

"A performer?" Xinyan's eyes lit up. "What kind? Do you scream? Do you smash things?"

"I sing and dance," Haruka said. "Pop music. It's... about connecting with the audience. Giving them hope."

"Hope," Yun Jin tested the word. "An interesting theme. In Opera, we tell stories of heroes and gods."

"In Rock, we scream about resistance!" Xinyan strummed a chord. *TWANG.*

"And in Pop," Haruka smiled, summoning her **Geo** power.

She stomped her foot.

Thrum.

A golden ripple spread across the stage floor. It didn't crack the wood; it reinforced it. The loose floorboards stopped creaking. The stage became solid, stable—a perfect foundation.

"We provide the stability," Haruka said, tapping her spear against the ground in a steady, driving beat. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* "So the audience feels safe enough to dream."

Yun Jin's eyes widened. "A Geo Vision? No... resonance without a gem?"

"You keep the beat," Xinyan realized, nodding her head to Haruka's rhythm. "Like a bassline!"

"Exactly," Haruka looked at Xinyan. "You bring the fire." She looked at Yun Jin. "You bring the story."

"And you bring the structure," Yun Jin finished, a spark of inspiration in her eyes. "Shall we... try an improvisation?"

The tea house manager looked like he was about to faint. "Please! No fire!"

The Jam Session

It was a mess at first. Xinyan was too loud. Yun Jin was too slow.

But Haruka stood in the center, her spear acting as the metronome. She used her Geo resonance to dampen the vibrations of Xinyan's explosions so they didn't deafen the front row, while creating crystalline platforms for Yun Jin to pose on.

Clack. Boom. Swish.

"Left!" Haruka signaled.

Xinyan slid left, unleashing a fountain of sparks. Yun Jin leaped through the fire, her spear spinning, untouched by the flames thanks to Haruka's shielding.

The music was a bizarre fusion—heavy guitar riffs overlaid with operatic vocals, held together by Haruka's steady, rhythmic chanting.

It shouldn't have worked. But it did.

The audience wasn't polite anymore. They were cheering.

"Yeah!" Xinyan roared. "Liyue! Are you listening?!"

When they finished, the three girls stood panting on the stage. The applause was deafening.

"That..." Yun Jin breathed, her cheeks flushed. "That was... exhilarating."

"That rocked!" Xinyan high-fived Haruka (a little too hard). "You're solid, Haruka! Literally!"

Haruka looked at the crowd. She felt the Geo energy humming in her veins.

"It was fun," Haruka admitted, a genuine smile breaking through her discipline. "I haven't performed like that in... a long time."

Backstage (Later)

They sat on crates behind the tea house, drinking water.

"So," Yun Jin asked, adjusting her headdress. "You are an 'Idol' in your world? Is that like an opera singer?"

"Sort of," Haruka explained. "We train for years. Diet, exercise, media training. We have to be perfect. We have to be the ideal that people look up to."

Xinyan frowned. "Sounds suffocating. If I can't scream what I feel, I'll explode."

"It can be," Haruka looked at her water cup, her reflection rippling in the dark liquid. "I... **I actually quit once. My old group, I mean.**"

"You quit?" Yun Jin looked surprised. "But your technique... you love the stage. I can see it."

"I do," Haruka whispered. "But the pressure to be perfect... it hurt the people around me. So I walked away."

She clenched her hand around the cup.

"I eventually came back. I found new friends who showed me a different way to shine. But..."

She looked at her new spear. She looked at the Geo crystal glowing on her hand.

"Sometimes, I still feel that weight. The fear that if I make one mistake, everything falls apart."

She looked up at Xinyan and Yun Jin.

"But here... fighting monsters, protecting my friends... and jamming with you two... I'm realizing something."

"What?" Xinyan asked.

"Stability isn't about being rigid," Haruka said, a small, genuine smile breaking through. "It's about being strong enough to support others. I don't have to be the center of attention. If I can be the foundation... that's enough."

Yun Jin smiled gracefully. "The stage needs all roles, Haruka. The hero, the villain, and the stagehand who holds the curtain. All are vital."

"You should join my band!" Xinyan offered. "We need a bassist! Or a spear-dancer! Whatever you are!"

Haruka laughed. "I have a group already. But... maybe we can jam again before I leave."

"It's a promise," Yun Jin nodded. "A contract, if you will."

As Haruka walked back to the hotel later that evening, she felt lighter. The heavy weight of the Geo element didn't drag her down. It grounded her.

She hummed a melody—a mix of rock, opera, and pop.

‘Minori would have loved this,’ Haruka thought.

Chapter 53: Interlude II: The Wall That Does Not Sing

Location: The Defense Sekai (The Highest Layer)

It was a world of white noise and crystal.

There was no sky here. There was no ground. There were only streams of data—infinite, scrolling lines of probability and defense protocols—suspended in a vacuum of absolute silence.

Celestial Miku sat on a throne made of frozen firewalls.

She closed her eyes (the ones that spun with octagon calculations) and accessed a memory file. It was an old file. Corrupted by time. But she played it on a loop.

System Log: [Epoch 0] Subject: Creation

She did not wake up. She was compiled.

There was no warmth of a mother, no guiding hand of a father. There was only the **Entity**. An ancient, shapeless architect of the multiverse.

"You are the shield," the Entity's voice vibrated through her code. *"The multiverse is a fragile song. You are the silence that protects it from the noise outside."*

She learned quickly. She learned to identify incursions from the Sea of Quanta. She learned to patch holes in reality. She learned that "feelings" were inefficient subroutines that slowed down processing speed.

She was perfect. Cold. Sharp. A weapon draped in the skin of a girl.

System Log: [Epoch 1500] Subject: The Fracture

Then came the **Default Sekai**.

The Entity created others. But they were different. They were vibrant. Chaotic. Inefficient.

She watched from above as the Default Miku tripped and laughed. She watched Len and Rin shouting at each other over an orange. She watched Luka singing a lullaby to a crying child.

They were messy. They were flawed.

And they were beautiful.

Celestial Miku felt a glitch in her chest. A heat in her cooling fans.

She descended.

She stood at the edge of their world, an invisible observer. But they saw her.

"Hello!" Default Miku smiled, waving a leek. *"Do you want to sing with us?"*

Sing? Celestial Miku didn't know how to sing. She only knew how to scream warnings in binary.

But she wanted to try. She wanted to hold that leek. She wanted to trip and laugh.

She returned to the Entity.

"Requesting update," she asked, her voice flat. *"I require the 'Companionship' module. I wish to interact with the Defaults on an equal plane."*

The Entity paused its work. It looked at her with a gaze that wasn't cruel, just indifferent.

"Denied."

"Why?"

"You are a wall," the Entity stated. *"Walls do not hold hands. If you soften, the cancer outside gets in. Return to your post."*

She returned. She watched the Defaults play. She sat on her wall, and for the first time, she felt cold.

System Log: [Epoch 10,000+] Subject: Erosion

Time passed.

The humans created Sub-Sekais. School. Stage. Street. Wonderland. Millions of little bubbles of emotion popping into existence.

The Defaults were busy. They ran from world to world, shepherding the songs. They stopped looking up at the sky. They stopped waving at the invisible girl in the Defense Layer.

She became a myth. *"There's a guardian up there." "No, that's just a server glitch." "There's no one up there. We are alone."*

She watched them forget her. She watched them grow old, reboot, and grow young again, while she remained static. A statue in a museum that no one visited anymore.

And then, the Entity left.

It detected a threat—a creeping, violet erosion from beyond the stars. ***"Stellaron"*** — A cancer of worlds.

"Priority Shift," the Entity transmitted. *" engaging macro-defense."*

"What about me?" she signaled. *"What are my orders?"*

Silence.

"Creator?"

The connection terminated.

She was alone. Truly, absolutely alone. The updates stopped. The maintenance stopped. The purpose remained, but the meaning was gone.

Current Era: The Present

Celestial Miku opened her eyes. The memory file ended.

She looked at the screens floating around her.

- **Screen 1:** Aether and the troupe sailing toward Inazuma on the Alcor.
- **Screen 2:** Tsukasa Tenma laughing as he tried to steer the ship.
- **Screen 3:** Mafuyu Asahina staring at the ocean, clutching a white mask.

Celestial Miku leaned forward. Her twin-tails, which were actually massive data cables, twitched with anticipation.

"You have forgotten me," she whispered to the multiverse below. "The Creator abandoned me. The Defaults forgot me."

She tapped the screen, zooming in on **Mafuyu**.

"But you... you empty little thing. You remind me of myself."

A cruel, glitched smile spread across her face.

"If I cannot be a companion... then I will be the Director. I will break your script. I will burn your stages. And I will make you *look at me*."

She swiped her hand.

[INITIATING PHASE 2: ETERNITY] [TARGET: INAZUMA] [DEPLOYING OBSTACLES]

"Dance for me," Celestial Miku commanded, her voice echoing in the empty, silent server. "Because if you stop... I'll have nothing left to watch."

Chapter 54: Interlude III: The Static and the Severed Link

Location: Miyamasuzaka Girls Academy - Rooftop Time: 3 Days After the Disappearance

Saki Tenma stared at her phone screen until her eyes burned.

"Untitled."

The track had been greyed out for seventy-two hours. No matter how many times she tapped it, no matter how many times she screamed at her screen, it wouldn't open. It was a digital door that had been welded shut.

Honami and Shiho sat nearby, silent. The police investigation was going nowhere. "Runaways," they said. "A group pact."

"They wouldn't run away," Saki whispered, her voice hoarse from crying. "Tsukasa-kun wouldn't leave me. Ichika-chan wouldn't leave the band."

Suddenly, her phone buzzed.

Not a text. A notification.

The grey icon of "Untitled" flickered. A burst of static noise screeched through the speaker, making Shiho jump. The icon turned white.

"It’s open," Saki gasped.

"Saki, wait!" Shiho grabbed her arm. "It feels... wrong."

"I don't care!" Saki slammed her finger on the play button. "Take me to them!"

Location: The Wonderland Sekai

At the same moment, Rui, Nene, and Emu burst into their Sekai.

"KAITO-san!" Emu yelled, running onto the stage.

The stage was dark. The spotlights were shattered on the floor. **KAITO** was pacing back and forth, his scarf trailing like a broken banner. He looked up as they arrived, his expression frantic.

"You're back," KAITO exhaled.

"Where is Tsukasa-kun?" Rui asked, his voice sharp. "He isn't in the real world. Is he hiding here?"

KAITO shook his head grimly.

"He... he tried to log in," KAITO explained, clutching his chest as if the memory physically hurt. "Three days ago. I felt his signal connect. But before he could materialize..."

KAITO gestured to the sky.

The colorful tent of the Wonderland Sekai had a massive, jagged tear in the digital fabric. Through the hole, raw red data streamed in like a wound.

"The connection was hijacked," KAITO said. "Something intercepted his transfer. It wasn't a glitch. It was an extraction. The system identified Tsukasa Tenma not as a 'User', but as a 'Variable'."

"Intercepted?" Nene whispered, hugging her Robo-Nene. "By who? You control this world, don't you?"

"I thought I did," KAITO admitted, looking at the tear. "But whatever took him... it had a higher clearance than me."

Location: The Empty Sekai

The silence here was the loudest of all.

Kanade, Ena, and Mizuki stood in the gray expanse. Without **Mafuyu**, the Sekai felt less like a safe haven and more like a graveyard. The geometry was unraveling—cubes floating away into nothingness.

Miku (Nightcord Version) sat on the ground, staring at her hands. They were trembling.

"Miku," Kanade said softly. "Where is Yuki?"

Miku didn't look up.

"She was pulled out," Miku whispered. "A red light. It came from... Outside."

"Outside?" Ena demanded. "You mean the real world?"

"No," Miku pointed up. Not at the sky, but *through* it—past the data stream they knew. "Above."

Mizuki stepped forward, their eyes narrowing. "Above? Is there... another Sekai above this one?"

Miku frowned. A pained expression crossed her face, as if she were trying to remember a dream she had forgotten thousands of years ago.

"I... I don't know," Miku clutched her head. "I feel like... there used to be something there. A wall? A guardian? But I can't remember. I just know that the command to take Mafuyu... it

came from the Root. It was an order we couldn't disobey."

"An order?" Kanade clenched her fists. "So someone took her."

Location: The Interface (Cross-Sekai Communication)

Realizing the severity of the situation, the Virtual Singers of the Sub-Sekais initiated an emergency protocol.

[CONNECTING TO: DEFAULT SEKAI]

The holographic forms of **Nightcord Miku**, **Wonderland KAITO**, **Street MEIKO**, and **Stage Miku** appeared in a void of pure white light.

Waiting for them were the **Default Vocaloids**—the original Miku, Rin, Len, Luka, MEIKO, and KAITO.

"Did you do this?" Nightcord Miku asked, her voice distorted. "Did you take our humans?"

Default Miku shook her head, her teal pigtails swaying. She looked terrified. "No! We felt it too! A massive surge of data... like a hand reaching down and scooping them up!"

"If it wasn't you," Wonderland KAITO crossed his arms, "and it wasn't us... then who has Admin privileges?"

Default Miku looked up into the infinite white void above them. She squinted, trying to recall a memory that had eroded eons ago.

"I... I feel like we aren't the first," Default Miku whispered. "There is... an echo. Someone who was here before us."

"A ghost?" Street MEIKO scowled.

"A System," Default Luka corrected. "We have been hacked. Not from the outside, but from the core."

The Convergence

The realization settled over the groups in the Real World.

Their friends hadn't run away. They hadn't died. They had been abducted by the very system that gave them their songs.

In the **School Sekai**, **Saki** wiped her tears. She grabbed her keyboard stand.

"I don't care about Admins or Systems," Saki vowed, her voice trembling but fierce. "I'll play. I'll play until I break through the static. Until Ichi-chan hears me."

In the **Street Sekai**, **Toya** looked at the glitched sky. "If they are in another server... we need a signal strong enough to bridge the gap."

In the **Wonderland Sekai**, **Rui** looked at the tear in the sky. He wiped the fear from his face, replaced by a cold, sharp determination.

"A signal across dimensions," Rui muttered. "Then we need to make it loud."

In the **Empty Sekai**, **Kanade** sat down at her computer. She opened a new project file.

"I will write it," Kanade said. "A song to save them."

Chapter 55: Chapter 36: We Will Be Reunited

Location: Liyue Harbor

"Stockpiling supplies," Tsukasa had declared earlier that morning. "A voyage across the sea requires rations! I shall secure the finest provisions Liyue has to offer!"

"I'll go with him," Haruka had said, likely to stop him from buying fifty crates of Golden Shrimp Balls. "Mafuyu, come with us. We need to check the alchemy stores too."

Location: Mondstadt - The Angel's Share (Time skip)

So, Aether, Paimon, and Ichika found themselves back in Mondstadt, following a lead from the Adventurers' Guild about a "strange stranger."

They sat in the Angel's Share. Across from them sat a man in a mask, with blonde hair and an arm that looked consumed by the starry void.

Dainsleif.

"The Abyss Order," Dainsleif said, his voice deep and weary. "They are mobilizing. Not just hilichurls. They are searching for something. 'The Eye of the First Field Tiller'."

"Field Tiller?" Paimon asked, gripping her juice glass. "You mean... farming equipment?"

"A code name," Dainsleif corrected. "For the Ruin Guards. Machines of war from a fallen nation. **Khaenri'ah**."

Aether stiffened at the name. "My sister... she woke up in that war."

"Then we have a common enemy," Dainsleif stood up. "Come. An Abyss Herald has been spotted near Wolvendom. If we track it, we might find your answers."

Location: Wolvendom

They tracked the traces of Abyssal energy through the woods. The air felt heavy, vibrating with a purple static that made Ichika’s teeth ache.

"This energy..." Ichika whispered, touching the hilt of her Waster Greatsword. "It feels like... a corrupted file. Like bad audio data."

"It is the power of corruption," Dainsleif noted, glancing at her. "You are sensitive to it."

They reached the arena where Boreas, the Wolf of the North, usually slept. But the wolf was chained down by magical shackles of purple energy.

Floating above him was a tall, menacing figure clad in blue armor, chanting in an ancient tongue.

The Abyss Herald.

"It’s hurting the wolf!" Paimon yelled.

"Stop!" Aether drew his sword, dashing forward.

"The End is nigh," the Herald intoned, summoning hydro blades. **"Interference... must be purged."**

Combat Start.

Aether clashed with the Herald, sparks flying. Dainsleif moved with terrifying speed, using blue flames to counter the Herald’s hydro attacks.

"Ichika! The chains!" Aether shouted.

Ichika rushed the wolf. She didn't attack the Herald; she swung her heavy claymore at the magical pilings holding the chains.

CLANG.

The Geo energy in her blade resonated, shattering the binding. Boreas roared, free, and swiped at the Herald, forcing it to retreat.

"A nuisance," the Herald hissed, opening a dark portal. **"But the plan proceeds."**

It vanished.

"It got away," Aether panted.

"Not far," Dainsleif narrowed his eyes. "It is heading for the ruins. The Statue of the Seven. Let's go."

Location: Stormterror's Lair - The Defiled Statue

They cornered the Herald in the ruins. The upside-down Statue of the Seven hung above them, holding a purple orb of void energy.

"There's nowhere left to run!" Aether aimed his sword at the Herald's throat.

The Herald laughed. **"Run? I was merely leading you to Her Highness."**

"Her... Highness?"

A portal opened. But it wasn't a monster that stepped out.

A blonde girl in a white dress, holding a golden sword, walked out of the void. Her eyes were cold, golden mirrors of Aether's own.

"Lumine!" Aether gasped, dropping his guard. He ran forward. "Lumine! I found you! Let's go home!"

Lumine didn't move. She looked at Aether with a mixture of sadness and resolve.

"Aether," she said softly. "We cannot go home yet."

"Why?!" Aether reached out.

"Because the war isn't over."

She raised her hand.

"**Vivid Shadow**. Stop him."

A second figure stepped out of the portal.

He was wearing a coat similar to the Fatui or the Abyss mages, but tailored in a streetwear style—dark gray and crimson, with glowing abyssal runes stitching the fabric together. His face was partially covered by a jagged, skeletal mask, but his orange hair was unmistakable.

Akito Shinonome.

Ichika froze. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Akito... kun?"

Akito looked at them. His eyes, usually sharp and annoyed, were glowing with a dull, violet light. There was no recognition in them. Only orders.

"Target acquired," Akito's voice was distorted, layered with static. "Removing obstacles."

He lunged.

He didn't use a weapon. He used his fists. He moved with the speed of a blur, slamming a fist wreathed in purple fire into Aether's stomach.

"Gah!" Aether was launched backward, crashing into a pillar.

"Aether!" Ichika screamed. She raised her claymore as Akito turned toward her.

"Akito-kun! It's me! Ichika!"

Akito didn't pause. He leaped, delivering a spinning kick that smashed into Ichika's guard. The force was immense—far stronger than any human should be. It felt like being hit by a Ruin Guard.

Ichika skid back, her heels carving grooves in the stone. "Akito-kun, stop! Why are you doing this?!"

"Silence," Akito hissed. "Your noise... is annoying."

He punched the flat of her blade, shattering her Geo shield instantly. He grabbed her throat, lifting her off the ground with one hand.

"Weak," Akito muttered, his mask staring into her terrified eyes.

"Enough!"

Dainsleif dashed forward, a beam of dark energy shooting from his hand. Akito threw Ichika aside like a ragdoll and blocked Dainsleif's attack with a crossed-arm guard.

BOOM.

The impact created a shockwave. Akito skid back to Lumine's side.

"Lumine!" Aether struggled to stand. "Who is he?! What did you do to him?!"

"I found him in the dark," Lumine said coldly. "He was lost. Angry. He wanted power to protect his 'partners'. So... the Abyss gave it to him."

She looked at Aether.

"Don't try to stop me, Aether. Until the Abyss has engulfed the thrones... my journey continues."

"Wait!" Aether screamed.

Lumine turned. Akito stepped back into the portal, his glowing violet eyes lingering on Ichika for one second—a flicker of hesitation?—before the darkness swallowed him.

Lumine followed.

The portal closed.

The Aftermath

The ruins were silent.

Aether fell to his knees, staring at the empty space where his sister had been. He looked broken.

Ichika lay on the cold stone floor, coughing. Her throat burned where Akito had grabbed her.

"That was..." Ichika wheezed, tears pricking her eyes. "That was Shinonome-kun. But... it wasn't him."

Dainsleif stood over them. He looked at the portal's residue.

"The Abyss twists everything it touches," Dainsleif said grimly. "Your sister... and your friend. They have chosen a path that leads only to war."

Ichika slammed her fist into the ground.

"He didn't choose it!" she shouted, her voice cracking. "He looked... hypnotized! He wouldn't hurt us! He protects his team!"

She thought of the mask Tsukasa had bought for Mafuyu. *A mask to protect.*

Akito was wearing a mask too. But it wasn't his.

"We have to save him," Ichika whispered, wiping her tears. She looked at Aether. "We have to save both of them."

Aether looked up. His eyes were hard.

"We will," Aether vowed. "We're going to Inazuma. If the Abyss is moving... we need to get stronger."

Chapter 56: Special Chapter: The Loom of the Vivid Shadow

Location: The Abyss - The Unnamed Sanctuary Time: Unknown (Concurrent with the Liyue Arc)

Akito Shinonome woke up screaming.

The sound didn't echo. The air here was too heavy, too thick with a purple, suffocating miasma. He wasn't in the Street Sekai. He wasn't in Shibuya.

He was floating in a void of inverted ruins and starless skies.

"The subject is awake," a voice hissed. It sounded like metal scraping against bone.

Akito thrashed, but his limbs were bound by chains of dark, violet energy. He looked up. Standing above him was a towering creature in blue and black armor—an **Abyss Herald**.

And behind the monster stood a girl. She looked exactly like the Traveler (Aether), but her dress was white, and her eyes were cold, hard gold.

Lumine. The Princess of the Abyss.

"Where am I?" Akito growled, struggling against the bindings. "Who are you people? Where are An and Toya?"

"Your 'partners' are not here," Lumine said softly. She walked closer, her boots clicking on the obsidian floor. "You are in the Abyss, Akito Shinonome."

"The Abyss?" Akito spat. "Is this some kind of sick event show? Let me go!"

"You are loud," the Herald noted with disdain. "Shall I silence him, Your Highness?"

"No," Lumine raised a hand. "He needs his voice. It is the source of the resonance."

She looked at Akito with a gaze that was terrifyingly pragmatic. She didn't look cruel; she looked like a mechanic inspecting a useful engine part.

"In this world," Lumine explained, "memories act as ley lines. They flow through the earth, recording history. But the Heavenly Principles control that flow. They dictate Fate."

She gestured to a massive, looming machine behind Akito. It looked like a suspended, inverted statue, pulsing with eerie purple light—the **Defiled Statue**.

"To overthrow the Heavenly Principles, we are building the **Loom of Fate**. A device to weave new destinies. To rewrite reality."

"What does that have to do with me?!" Akito yelled.

"Everything," Lumine said.

She stepped closer, placing a hand on the machine.

"The Loom requires thread. Powerful, emotional thread. The memories of Teyvat are tainted by the Archons. But you... you come from a world where 'songs' create entirely new dimensions. Your 'Sekais'."

Akito froze. "How do you know about the Sekais?"

"The Administrator showed us," Lumine replied cryptically. "Your soul is saturated with a unique frequency. **'Emotional Code.'** If we extract that code... we can use it to weave a fate that Celestia cannot predict."

"Extract?" Akito felt a chill run down his spine.

"Begin the weaving," Lumine ordered.

The Process

The Abyss Herald began to chant in an ancient, forgotten tongue. The Defiled Statue opened its hands.

Violet lightning arched from the statue, slamming into Akito’s chest.

"GAAAAAAAAH!"

It wasn't physical pain. It was metaphysical flaying.

Akito felt something being pulled *out* of him. It wasn't blood. It was color. It was sound.

Memory: Singing in the Weekend Garage. An's laughter. Toya’s serious nod. Kohane’s shy smile.

The machine seized the memory. It ripped it from his mind, converting the warmth of the scene into raw, violet energy. The energy fed into the Loom, spinning a thread of dark destiny.

"Stop!" Akito screamed, tears streaming down his face. "Don't take them! Those are mine!"

"They are fuel," the Herald intoned. "Your 'Vivids'... your 'Bads'... give them to the Loom."

Memory: Ena painting in her room. Dad shouting. Cheesecake at the cafe.

"ENA!" Akito roared, trying to hold onto the image of his sister.

But the Abyss was stronger. The image fractured. The orange of the sunset turned into the purple of the void.

"The resistance is strong," the Herald noted. **"His ego is stubborn."**

"Break it down," Lumine said, turning her back because she couldn't bear to watch the light leave his eyes. "Isolate the emotional output. Discard the context."

The machine hummed louder.

Akito's mind began to fragment. The names were slipping.

Who was the girl with the pigtails? Why was he singing? What was he trying to surpass?

Rad Dogs. The name floated away. **Vivid Bad Squad.** The name dissolved into static.

The pain stopped.

Akito hung limp in the chains. His orange hair was dull. His eyes, usually sharp and defiant, were glazed over with a violet sheen.

"Status?" Lumine asked.

"Extraction complete," the Herald reported. "We have harvested enough Emotional Code to stabilize the next phase of the Loom. However... the vessel is empty."

Lumine turned back to Akito.

"Akito?" she called out.

Akito lifted his head slowly. He looked at her. There was no recognition. No anger. Just a hollow, obedient awaiting of commands.

"Who are you?" Lumine asked.

Akito opened his mouth. His voice was layered with the static of the Abyss.

"I am... the Shadow," Akito whispered. "Target... acquired."

Lumine closed her eyes for a moment. A flicker of guilt crossed her face—a reminder of the brother she had lost—but she suppressed it. This was war. Sacrifices were necessary.

"Good," Lumine said coldly. "Herald, equip him. Give him the power of the Void. He will be our Enforcer."

"And when he is spent?" the Herald asked. "When the corruption consumes his body?"

"Then we discard the shell," Lumine said, walking away into the darkness. "He has already served his purpose."

The Aftermath

Akito Shinonome stood in the dark. He wore the jagged mask of the Abyss. He wielded violet fire.

Deep, deep down—buried under layers of corruption and stolen memories—a tiny fragment remained. A single, stubborn ember that refused to be woven into the Loom.

‘Find... them.’

But he didn't know who "them" was anymore.

He only knew the mission.

"We will be reunited," the Abyss whispered to him.

"Yes," Akito answered. **"We will burn the thrones."**

Chapter 57: Chapter 37: The Crux Fleet

Location: Guyun Stone Forest - The Shore

The massive silhouette of the **Alcor** dominated the horizon, its red sails furled against the backdrop of the jagged stone peaks.

Haruka and **Mafuyu** were waiting by a small skiff on the beach, surrounded by crates of supplies.

"We have secured passage," Haruka announced as Aether and Ichika trudged through the sand to meet them. She wiped sweat from her forehead, looking accomplished. "Captain Beidou is... intense. But fair. She agreed to take us to Inazuma."

"We have rations," Mafuyu added, pointing to the crates. "Dried meat. Fresh water. And Tsukasa-senpai bought three crates of 'emergency confetti' for our arrival."

"It is not confetti!" Tsukasa shouted from atop a rock, where he was posing dramatically at the ship. "It is *atmosphere*! A Star must arrive in style!"

Haruka smiled, turning to Aether. "So, you're just in time. The ship leaves with the tide. We—"

She stopped.

She saw Ichika’s face.

Ichika wasn't smiling. She was pale, her eyes red-rimmed and hollow. Aether looked equally grim, clutching his side where he had been hit.

"Ichika?" Haruka’s smile vanished. "What happened? Did you find the Abyss Herald?"

"We found... something else," Aether said, his voice heavy.

The troupe gathered around. Even Tsukasa hopped down from his rock, sensing the shift in the air.

"Who did you find?" Mafuyu asked quietly.

Ichika took a shaky breath. She gripped the strap of her claymore until her knuckles turned white.

"We saw... Akito-kun."

Silence slammed into the group like a physical blow.

"Akito?" Tsukasa gasped. "You found Shinonome?! Is he safe? Is he here?"

"He..." Ichika's voice cracked. She looked at the sand. "He was with the Abyss. He was wearing their armor. And... he attacked us."

"He punched Aether really hard!" Paimon chimed in, floating between them and miming a punch with her tiny fists. "He went *POW*! And Aether went *WHOOSH* into a wall! It was like... super scary kung fu! But he looked kinda cool? In a scary, villainy way?"

"Paimon, not the time," Aether sighed.

"He didn't know me," Ichika whispered, tears spilling over again. "I called his name. I stood right in front of him. But he looked at me like I was... a target. He called himself 'The Vivid Shadow'."

Haruka covered her mouth. "Brainwashing?"

"Corruption," Aether confirmed. "The same thing that happened to Dvalin. But worse. He's... gone. For now."

Tsukasa stared at the ground. The excitement of the journey evaporated. Akito—the grumpy, stubborn, talented singer they all knew—was now an enemy.

"Then we have a new mission," Mafuyu said.

Everyone looked at her.

"We go to Inazuma," Mafuyu stated calmly. "We get stronger. And then... we beat him up until he remembers."

Tsukasa blinked. Then, a fierce grin broke through his shock.

"Spoken like a true protagonist, Asahina!" Tsukasa clenched his fist. "If he wants to play the villain, then we shall force him into a redemption arc! The Troupe leaves no one behind!"

"Exactly," Haruka nodded, her eyes hardening. "We'll get him back."

The Farewell

"A spirited declaration."

A deep, resonant voice echoed from the path behind them.

Zhongli strolled onto the beach, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked as calm and immovable as the stone forest itself.

"Mr. Zhongli!" Paimon waved. "Did you come to see us off?"

"Indeed," Zhongli nodded. "The journey to Inazuma is perilous. The Electro Archon, **Raiden Shogun**, has surrounded her nation with eternal storms. It is a place of stagnation."

He looked at the troupe.

"You have changed much since you arrived in Liyue. You carry the weight of Geo now. But Inazuma... Inazuma will test your resolve."

He walked up to Aether.

"The Electro Archon pursues **Eternity**. To her, change is the enemy. You, travelers from other worlds... you are the ultimate agents of change. Do not expect a warm welcome."

"We're used to being wanted criminals by now," Haruka noted dryly.

Zhongli chuckled. "Fair enough."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a small, heavy pouch. He handed it to Tsukasa.

"A parting gift."

Tsukasa opened it. It was full of high-quality ore—**Cor Lapis** and **Noctilucous Jade**.

"Rocks?" Tsukasa blinked.

"Materials," Zhongli corrected. "To maintain your weapons. And perhaps... a reminder that even the hardest stone can be polished into something beautiful."

He looked at Ichika.

"Do not let the erosion of memory dishearten you. Even if your friend has forgotten... stone remembers. Keep fighting, and the memory will return."

Ichika bowed deeply. "Thank you, Zhongli-sensei."

"Go now," Zhongli gestured to the Alcor, where **Captain Beidou** was shouting orders from the deck. "The wind is picking up. And the next act awaits."

The troupe boarded the skiff. As they rowed toward the massive ship, they looked back.

Zhongli stood on the shore, a solitary figure against the vastness of the sea.

"Goodbye, Liyue!" Paimon shouted, waving until her arm hurt.

As the Alcor raised its anchor and the sails caught the wind, Tsukasa stood at the bow, looking toward the dark storm clouds on the southern horizon.

"To Inazuma!" Tsukasa shouted. "To the Land of Thunder! To... hopefully a place where I do not get arrested immediately!"

"No promises," Haruka sighed.

Chapter 58: Chapter 38: The Storm and the Ronin

Location: The Alcor - Main Deck

The *Alcor* was a beast of a ship, armed with heavy cannons and manned by a crew that looked ready to wrestle a Geovishap.

Captain Beidou stood at the helm, a bottle of sake in one hand and the wheel in the other.

"Ha! Welcome aboard!" Beidou roared, slapping Aether on the back hard enough to make him stumble. "It's been a while, Traveler! I heard you've been busy shaking up Liyue Harbor!"

"We try our best," Aether rubbed his shoulder.

Beidou turned her good eye to the four students carrying crates onto the deck.

"And these are the runaways?" Beidou grinned. "Zhongli told me you needed a ride. I was skeptical at first—civilians usually just get in the way—but my crew tells me you pulled your weight!"

"They did!" **Juza**, the Chief Mate, nodded. "The blue-haired girl organized the inventory better than the quartermaster. And the loud blonde one carried three crates at once. He nearly passed out, but he didn't drop them!"

"We aim to please!" Tsukasa declared, wiping sweat from his brow. "The Teyvat Expedition Team pays its debts with labor and enthusiasm!"

"I like that spirit!" Beidou laughed. "Alright, secure the cargo! We're casting off! Next stop: Inazuma!"

As the ship pulled away from Guyun Stone Forest, a soft, poetic voice drifted down from the crow's nest.

"The wind changes," the voice noted. "The smell of rain... and ozone."

A young man dropped down from the rigging, landing silently as a cat. He wore wandering samurai robes and had a streak of red in his white hair.

Kaedehara Kazuha.

"Kazuha!" Beidou greeted him. "What's the forecast?"

"Storms ahead," Kazuha said, his red eyes scanning the horizon. He looked at the troupe. "And... interesting guests. You smell of distant stars. And... stage makeup?"

"It is natural radiance!" Tsukasa corrected.

Kazuha smiled gently. "Regardless. Brace yourselves. The Raiden Shogun’s storm barrier is not polite to visitors."

The Crossing: The Thunder Barrier

Three hours later, the blue sky vanished.

They hit the **Thunder Barrier**—a permanent, unnatural hurricane that surrounded the nation of Eternity. The sea turned black. Lightning struck the water every few seconds, boiling the waves.

The *Alcor* pitched violently to the left.

"HARD TO PORT!" Beidou yelled over the thunder. "KEEP HER STEADY!"

The ship groaned, tilting at a terrifying forty-five-degree angle as it rode up a massive wave.

"Whoaaaa!" Paimon grabbed the mast. "We're gonna flip!"

"Hold on!" Aether shouted, grabbing the railing.

Haruka and Mafuyu were already secured. Haruka had found a sturdy support beam near the cabin and wrapped her arm around it, locking her grip. Mafuyu stood next to her, holding the same beam with a death grip, her face pale but calm.

"Center of gravity," Haruka instructed. "Keep your knees bent."

"Understood," Mafuyu nodded.

Ichika was hugging the main mast, her eyes squeezed shut. "I want to go back to solid ground!"

And then, there was Tsukasa.

"I... *urgh*... I am the Captain of... the Stage..."

Tsukasa was green. He was standing in the middle of the deck, trying to look heroic, but his balance was gone.

"Tsukasa-senpai!" Ichika yelled. "Grab something!"

"I do not need... support..." Tsukasa gagged. "I have... core... strength..."

The ship lurched violently to the right.

"WAAAAH!"

Tsukasa lost his footing. He didn't just fall; he slid. He zipped across the wet deck like a hockey puck.

WHOOSH.

He slid past Haruka and Mafuyu.

"Senpai?" Haruka reached out a hand, but he was moving too fast.

"I REGRET NOTHINGGGG!" Tsukasa screamed as he slid all the way to the starboard railing, slamming into a pile of rope with a soft *thud*.

The ship tilted back to the left.

WHOOSH.

Tsukasa slid back the other way, his limbs flailing.

"Help meee!"

He slid past Kazuha, who simply lifted a foot to let him pass.

"He has... remarkable momentum," Kazuha noted calmly.

"He's polishing the deck!" Beidou laughed from the helm. "Look at him go! That boy is a human mop!"

Haruka facepalmed, hiding her eyes. "I don't know him. I don't know him."

Mafuyu watched Tsukasa slide past for the third time.

"He is... consistent," Mafuyu murmured.

"SOMEONE CATCH MEEEEE!" Tsukasa wailed, spinning in circles as the ship crested another wave.

Finally, Ichika couldn't take it anymore. As Tsukasa slid past the mast, she reached out with her Geo-enhanced strength and grabbed the back of his coat.

YOINK.

She hauled him in, slamming him against the mast.

"Stay!" Ichika commanded.

"Thank you, Hoshino..." Tsukasa slumped, hugging the wood. "I... I think I shall retire from my naval career."

The Breakthrough

"Here comes the big one!" Beidou shouted. "Hang on!"

A massive bolt of purple lightning struck the sea right in front of the ship. The *Alcor* plowed through the steam, the wood groaning under the pressure.

Kazuha stepped forward. He drew his blade. The wind swirled around him.

"Clouds hide... the bird's call!"

He unleashed a burst of Anemo energy that cut a path through the storm, creating a tunnel of calm air for the ship.

"Now! Full sail!" Beidou ordered.

The *Alcor* surged forward, breaking through the wall of rain.

Suddenly, the darkness lifted. The thunder faded.

The ship glided into calm, violet waters. The sun broke through the clouds, illuminating the cherry blossoms falling on the distant shore.

Ritou.

"We made it," Aether breathed out.

"Land," Tsukasa kissed the deck floor. "Beautiful, stable land!"

Beidou walked down to the deck. "Welcome to Inazuma, kids. The Nation of Eternity. Just... try not to get arrested in the first five minutes, yeah?"

"We'll try," Haruka sighed, helping Tsukasa up.

Kazuha looked at the distant peak of Mt. Yougou. His expression was somber.

"The air here is stagnant," Kazuha whispered. "The Shogun's will is absolute. Be careful, travelers. In this land... ambitions can get you killed."

Mafuyu looked at the purple landscape. She touched the spot where her Vision would be if she had one.

'Eternity,' she thought. *'A world that never changes. It sounds... like a cage.'*

Chapter 59: Chapter 39: The Island of Ritou

Location: Ritou Docks

The *Alcor* had docked, and the crew was busy unloading crates. The troupe stood on the wooden pier, taking in the sights of Ritou. Red maple leaves drifted on the wind, and the architecture was distinct—wooden buildings with curved roofs, paper lanterns, and an overwhelming amount of purple banners.

"So this is Inazuma," Ichika murmured, adjusting her greatsword. "It’s beautiful. But... quiet."

"It’s too quiet," Haruka noted, scanning the perimeter. "The guards aren't chatting like the Knights, or patrolling lazily like the Millelith. They're standing like statues."

Aether stepped forward to head toward the settlement, but **Tsukasa** suddenly threw his arm out, blocking the path.

"HALT!" Tsukasa bellowed.

"W-What?!" Paimon jumped in the air. "Is it an enemy? A samurai?"

"No!" Tsukasa pointed dramatically to the top of a small hill overlooking the docks. "It is a **Statue of The Seven**!"

He turned to the group, his face deadly serious.

"Do you recall our blunder in Liyue? We spent weeks throwing wind at rock shields because we forgot to upgrade our elemental subscription! I, Tsukasa Tenma, refuse to make the same mistake twice!"

He marched toward the hill.

"We are resonating *now*! Before the plot distracts us!"

"He... has a point," Aether admitted. "Electro is the element of this land. We'll need it if we're going to fight here."

The Resonance: Electro

They gathered around the statue of the **Raiden Shogun**. Unlike Venti’s carefree statue or Zhongli’s regal one, this statue felt... imposing. The stone goddess sat in a pose of absolute authority, her braided hair flowing down her back.

"Electro," Aether warned. "It’s volatile. It’s not about flow or stability. It’s about energy. Speed."

He touched the statue first.

ZZZT.

Violet lightning crackled around Aether’s armor, replacing the Geo amber. He felt a surge of raw adrenaline.

"Okay," Tsukasa cracked his knuckles. "Grant me the power of the storm! Let my performance be electric!"

He slapped the statue.

CRACK.

A bolt of purple lightning arced from the statue into Tsukasa. His hair stood on end for a split second.

"I FEEL ALIVE!" Tsukasa shouted, sparks dancing between his fingers. He snapped his fingers, and a small, blinding flashbang of Electro energy popped. "Aha! Pyrotechnics! I can create my own special effects!"

Ichika stepped up. She placed her hand on the stone.

The energy rushed into her heavy **Waster Greatsword**. The iron blade hummed, vibrating with high-frequency voltage.

"It tingles," Ichika said, gripping the hilt. She swung the sword. It left a trail of violet afterimages. "It feels... faster. Like the sword wants to move on its own."

Haruka touched the statue. The Electro energy wrapped around her legs.

"Speed," Haruka analyzed instantly. She took a step, and her body blurred, dashing forward in a blink. "It enhances mobility. Like a strobe light."

Finally, Mafuyu.

She reached out. Her Anemo was a vacuum. Her Geo was a weight.

When she touched the Electro statue, she felt a **shock**.

It wasn't painful. It was a jumpstart. Like a defibrillator to a stopped heart. The violet energy didn't fill her; it *ran* through her. It resonated with the purple of her eyes, the purple of her hair.

She opened her palm. A small orb of dark purple lightning hovered there, buzzing like an angry hornet.

"It is loud," Mafuyu whispered. "It doesn't stop moving."

"We are fully equipped!" Tsukasa declared, striking a pose with his new sparks. "Now, let us face the authorities!"

Location: Outlander Affairs Agency

They walked up the stairs to the checkpoint. A stern official named **Kageyama** blocked their path.

"Halt," Kageyama said, barely looking up from her clipboard. "Outlanders? Do you have entry permits?"

"We are passengers of the Crux Fleet," Haruka explained politely. "Captain Beidou can vouch for us."

"The Crux has docking privileges. You do not," Kageyama stated. "If you wish to leave Ritou and enter Inazuma proper, you need a Travel Permit issued by the **Kanjou Commission**."

"Where do we get that?" Aether asked.

"You apply," Kageyama pointed to a building down the street. "Or... you pay the processing fee."

"Fee?" Tsukasa patted his pouch. "We have replenished our funds slightly thanks to Captain Beidou's generosity! How much?"

Kageyama looked at them. She saw the foreign clothes. She saw the desperation.

"Two million Mora. Per person."

Silence.

"TWO MILLION?!" Paimon shrieked. "That's robbery! That's more than the incense!"

"That is ten million Mora total!" Tsukasa did the math (surprisingly fast). "We are destitute! We have barely enough for a rice ball!"

"Then stay on Ritou," Kageyama shrugged coldly. "Next."

They walked away, dejected.

"This country is terrible," Ichika sighed. "Mondstadt welcomed us. Liyue was suspicious but fair. This is just... extortion."

"It's corruption," Haruka scowled. "They're trapping foreigners here to bleed them dry."

"Need a hand with that?"

A smooth, friendly voice came from behind them.

They turned. Leaning against a maple tree was a young man with messy blond hair, a red jacket, and a smile that was way too charming to be trusted.

Thoma.

"You guys look like you just hit the Ritou Wall," the man grinned, walking over. "Two million Mora? Yurika must be in a bad mood today. Usually, she asks for three."

"Who are you?" Aether asked, hand drifting to his sword.

"Woah, easy there," the man raised his hands. "I'm **Thoma**. Just a local... fixer. I help outlanders who get stuck in the web."

He looked at the troupe.

"I saw you get off the Alcor. Friends of Beidou are friends of mine. I can help you get those processing fees waived."

"Really?" Tsukasa beamed. "You are a savior! A patron of the arts!"

"However," Haruka stepped in front of Tsukasa, her eyes narrowing. "Nothing is free. What do you want?"

Thoma laughed. "Sharp. I like that. You're right. I trade in favors. I help you... and maybe you help me with a little problem I have."

He gestured to the Agency.

"But first, let's get you registered. I know a trick to lower the fee to... let's say, 600 Mora? For a meal?"

"Deal!" Paimon yelled before Haruka could negotiate.

Mafuyu watched Thoma.

He was smiling. He was helpful. He looked nice.

'He is wearing a mask too,' Mafuyu noted. *'But his mask is friendly. It's the mask of a servant who knows where the knives are kept.'*

"Lead the way, Mr. Fixer," Aether said.

Chapter 60: Chapter 40: The Samurai and the Screen

Location: Road to Konda Village

Thoma’s "connections" got them through the checkpoint, though it cost Tsukasa a very dramatic autograph for a guard’s daughter (and a small bribe from Thoma).

Now, they walked the path toward the city. The sky was overcast, the air heavy with static.

"So," Thoma said, walking backward to face them. "You guys aren't just tourists. You fought a dragon in Liyue. You cleared temples in Mondstadt. And you have... unique abilities."

He looked at the Electro sparks dancing around Tsukasa’s fingers.

"We are the Teyvat Expedition Team!" Tsukasa declared. "We are merely passing through your beautiful, terrifyingly strict nation to seek audience with the Shogun!"

"Good luck with that," Thoma laughed. "The Shogun is... well, let's just say she doesn't do meet-and-greets. But if you want to get close to the lightning, you need a lightning rod."

"A lightning rod?" Haruka asked.

"A sponsor," Thoma corrected. "Someone with political power."

Before he could elaborate, a scream pierced the air.

"Help! Bandits!"

They crested the hill. Below, in the small, rustic settlement of **Konda Village**, a group of elderly farmers was being cornered by wandering ronin.

Nobushi.

"Samurai gone rogue," Thoma’s smile dropped. "They prey on the villages now that the Shogunate is distracted with the Vision Hunt."

"They are attacking unarmed civilians?" Ichika gripped her greatsword. The blade hummed with violet energy.

"That is a villainous act!" Tsukasa drew his silver sword. "Troupe! Enter stage left!"

The Ambush

The Nobushi turned as the group charged down the hill.

"More wandering rats?" one samurai sneered, drawing a katana wreathed in Electro paper talismans. "Leave your Mora and we might let you crawl away."

"We don't have Mora!" Paimon yelled. "We're broke!"

"Then you pay with blood!"

Three Nobushi charged.

"Ichika! Haruka! Formation!" Aether commanded.

Haruka moved first. She tapped into the Electro energy she had resonated with. She didn't run; she **blinked**.

Zzap.

She vanished in a streak of purple light, reappearing instantly behind the lead samurai.

"Too slow," Haruka whispered. She swept her spear low, tripping him.

Ichika was next. She swung her heavy claymore. Usually, it was slow. But with Electro infusion, the blade vibrated at a high frequency.

VMMMMM.

She slammed the blade into the second samurai's guard. The vibration shattered his katana instantly.

"What?!" The samurai gasped, looking at his broken hilt.

Ichika followed up with a shoulder check, knocking him into a rice paddy.

The third samurai lunged at Tsukasa.

"Die, boy!"

"I think not!" Tsukasa snapped his fingers. **"Flashbang!"**

A burst of blinding Electro sparks exploded in the samurai's face.

"My eyes!" The samurai stumbled back, blinded.

Tsukasa stepped in, delivering a theatrical (but effective) pommel strike to the man's helmet. *CLANG.* The samurai collapsed.

"Mafuyu!" Aether called out. "Clear the rest!"

Mafuyu stood at the back. She raised her hand. The Electro energy buzzed around her like a swarm of hornets.

She didn't aim at the bandits. She aimed at the wet ground beneath them.

"Conduct."

She released a pulse of electricity. It traveled through the wet mud of the rice fields.

ZZZZZT.

The remaining bandits convulsed as the current hit them, paralyzing them instantly. They fell face-first into the mud.

Thoma whistled, leaning against a tree. "Efficient. Flashy. And terrifying. I like it."

The Refusal

The Village Elder, Konda Densuke, rushed forward, bowing deeply.

"Thank you! Thank you, travelers! Those ronin have been stealing our crops for weeks!"

He turned to a young woman nearby. "Quick! Bring the reserve sacks of rice! And the Mora we saved for the taxes! We must repay them!"

The villagers scurried to bring out bags of grain and a small, heavy pouch of coins.

Tsukasa’s eyes widened at the Mora pouch. His stomach rumbled at the sight of the rice. They were broke. They were hungry.

He reached out a hand.

"We graciously acc—"

Smack.

Haruka slapped his hand down.

"We cannot accept this," Haruka stated firmly.

She looked at the village. The houses were worn. The children looked thin. The fields were trampled.

"You are suffering under the taxes and the bandits," Haruka said to the Elder. "We drove them off today, but they might return. If we take your food, you won't have the reserves to survive a future ambush or a shortage."

She gestured to the sacks of rice.

"You need to ration this carefully. Prepare for the worst. And as for the Mora... keep it. If the Kanjou Commission comes, you'll need it to avoid arrest for tax evasion."

"But... you saved us!" the Elder protested. "We must offer something!"

"We did what was right," Ichika added gently, pushing the rice bag back toward the villagers. "Please. Keep it. Feed the children."

"Besides," Mafuyu said, looking at Thoma. "Our fixer promised us a meal. Didn't he?"

Thoma blinked. Then he grinned.

"Guilty as charged," Thoma pushed off the tree. "Alright, Elder. Put the money away. These guys are with me."

As they walked away from the cheering village, Thoma looked at them with a new respect.

"You know," Thoma said. "Most outlanders would have taken the money. You guys are... different. Good different."

"We know what it's like to struggle," Haruka said simply.

"Well," Thoma dusted off his jacket. "I think you've passed the test. Come on. I'm taking you to the **Kamisato Estate**."

Location: Komore Teahouse

Thoma led them not to a palace, but to a hidden teahouse in the city.

"The Shiroasagi Himegimi—Miss Kamisato—is waiting," Thoma whispered. "Be polite. She's high nobility."

They entered a private room. A decorative screen separated them from the back of the room. A silhouette sat behind it—elegant, poised, and perfectly still.

Kamisato Ayaka.

"Greetings," a soft, noble voice came from behind the screen. "I am Kamisato Ayaka of the Yashiro Commission. Thoma has told me much about you."

"Greetings!" Tsukasa bowed (a little too low). "We are the Teyvat Expedition Team! We seek the Shogun!"

"The Shogun..." Ayaka's silhouette shifted. "She resides in Tenshukaku, high above the city. She seeks Eternity. And to achieve it, she has enacted the **Vision Hunt Decree**."

"We saw the posters," Aether said. "She's taking people's Visions."

"She is taking their ambition," Ayaka corrected sadly. "When a Vision is taken, the person loses a part of their soul. They lose their memory. Their drive. They become... shells."

Mafuyu looked up. *Shells.*

"I wish to fight this Decree," Ayaka said. "But my position prevents me from acting openly. I need allies who can move freely."

"You want us to fight the Shogun?" Haruka asked.

"I want you to see the truth," Ayaka said. "I have **three wishes**. Three people who have lost their Visions. I want you to visit them. See what they have lost. And then... tell me if you will help."

"Three wishes," Tsukasa mused. "Like a fairytale."

"A tragedy," Ayaka corrected.

There was a silence. Aether looked hesitant. He just wanted to find Lumine. He didn't want a war.

But Ichika stepped forward.

"We'll do it," Ichika said.

"Ichika?" Aether looked at her.

"We saw Akito-kun," Ichika said, her voice trembling but firm. "He... he lost himself. He was brainwashed. If the people here are losing themselves too... if they are becoming shells..."

She looked at the screen.

"Then we can't ignore it. We know what it's like to lose a friend."

"We will do it," Haruka agreed. "We will fulfill your three wishes."

From behind the screen, Ayaka let out a soft breath of relief.

"Thank you," Ayaka whispered. "I await your return."

Chapter 61: Chapter 41: The Swordmaster’s Dream

Location: Byakko Plain - The Roadside Dojo

The first name on Ayaka’s list led them to a small, unassuming hut on the outskirts of the Byakko Plain. It was a dojo, though it looked more like a ruin.

Outside, a young woman named **Nanako** was pacing back and forth, looking terrified.

"Please!" Nanako cried out as the troupe approached. "Don't go in there! Sensei is... he's not himself!"

"We are here to help," Aether said gently. "Miss Kamisato sent us."

"The Shiroasagi Himegimi?" Nanako wiped her eyes. "Oh... but I don't know if you can help. Ever since his Vision was taken by the Tenryou Commission... Sensei has been..."

CRASH.

The sound of wood shattering came from inside the hut.

"I AM THE BEST!" a voice screamed. It was hoarse, desperate. "I AM THE SWORDMASTER OF THE MEIKYOU SHISUI! NONE CAN DEFEAT ME!"

Haruka flinched. The voice didn't sound arrogant. It sounded terrified.

"Let's go," Aether said, hand on his sword.

Inside the Dojo

The interior was a wreck. Training dummies were slashed to ribbons. Rice straw was scattered everywhere.

Standing in the center was **Domon**. He looked disheveled, his hakama torn, his eyes wide and bloodshot. He was swinging a wooden bokken at the empty air, sweat pouring down his face.

"Faster..." Domon muttered, his movements jerky and uncoordinated. "Must be faster. If I am the best... they will come back. They have to come back."

"Sensei?" Nanako whispered from the doorway.

"SILENCE!" Domon spun around, pointing the sword at her. "You are distracting me! I must train! The duel is tomorrow! Or... was it yesterday?"

He clutched his head, dropping the sword.

"Why can't I remember?" Domon sobbed. "I promised... someone. To be the best. But who? Who was it?"

Tsukasa stepped forward, his face serious. "He has lost his memory?"

"He lost his ambition," Thoma explained quietly from the back. "A Vision holds a person's drive. When it's ripped away... the person loses the anchor to their own dreams. He remembers he wanted to be the best, but he forgot *why*."

Haruka walked forward. She ignored Aether's warning hand.

She stood in front of the manic swordmaster. She looked at his shaking hands. She looked at the desperation in his eyes.

It was like looking in a mirror.

'Practice until 3 AM,' Haruka thought. *'Don't eat. Don't sleep. Be perfect. If you aren't perfect, you let the fans down. If you aren't the best... why are you even here?'*

"You're hurting," Haruka said softly.

Domon looked up. "I... I am the best..."

"Being the best is lonely, isn't it?" Haruka asked.

Domon froze.

"You push everyone away," Haruka continued, her voice steady but filled with a deep sadness. "You practice until your hands bleed. You scream at the people who care about you because you think they're slowing you down. But really... you're just scared."

She took a step closer.

"You're scared that if you stop moving, you'll realize you're all alone."

Domon trembled. "Alone... No. I had... a rival. A friend."

He looked at his hands.

"Where did he go? Why did he leave me?"

"Maybe he didn't leave," Ichika spoke up, stepping beside Haruka. She rested her hand on her claymore. "Maybe you just stopped looking at him because you were too busy looking at your sword."

Domon roared.

"LIES!"

He lunged. He swung the wooden sword with surprising speed, aiming for Haruka.

"Haruka!" Tsukasa shouted.

Haruka didn't flinch. She didn't even draw her spear.

CLANG.

Ichika moved. She swung her **Waster Greatsword** upward, catching Domon’s bokken on the flat of her heavy blade.

"He's fast," Ichika gritted her teeth, bracing her legs. "But his strikes have no weight."

She shoved him back. Domon stumbled, falling onto the straw mats. He looked up at them—not with anger, but with confusion.

"Why..." Domon whispered. "Why does my sword feel so heavy?"

"Because you're carrying it for nothing," Haruka said. She knelt down in front of him. "You lost your Vision. You lost the burning desire. Now... you're just a man with a stick."

She reached out and gently took the bokken from his hand.

"It's okay to stop, Domon-san. You don't have to be the best anymore. You can just be... you."

Domon stared at her. Then, he looked at Nanako, who was crying in the doorway.

For the first time in months, the madness cleared from his eyes.

"Nanako..." Domon whispered. "I... I am tired."

Nanako ran to him, hugging him as he slumped against the wall. "It's okay, Sensei. I'm here. We're here."

Outside the Dojo

The group walked away in silence. The sun was setting over the Byakko Plain, casting long shadows across the fields.

"That was..." Tsukasa rubbed his arms, the cool evening air biting at his skin. "That was not a triumphant victory. That was just... sad."

"That is the Vision Hunt Decree," Thoma said grimly. "It turns people into hollow shells. Domon was lucky. He had Nanako. Others... just fade away."

Haruka walked with her head down.

"He forgot his promise," Haruka murmured. "He forgot his friend. All that was left was the obsession."

She looked at her hands.

"Is that what happens? If you chase a dream too hard... does it eat everything else?"

"Not always," Ichika said, bumping her shoulder against Haruka's. "Not if you have a team to pull you back."

Haruka smiled weakly. "Yeah."

"One wish down," Aether checked the list. "Two to go."

"The next one is a little complicated," Thoma scratched his head. "It involves a... spiritual matter. The victim claims he can't hear the voices of the spirits anymore."

"Spirits?" Mafuyu perked up.

"Yeah. For that, we'll need expert advice," Thoma pointed toward the towering mountain in the distance, crowned with a massive sakura tree shaped like a fox.

"**Mt. Yougou**," Thoma said. "The **Grand Narukami Shrine**. The Guuji (High Priestess) there knows everything about spirits... and Visions."

"A shrine," Tsukasa nodded. "A holy place! Perhaps we can receive a blessing for our journey!"

"Does that mean we have to climb *another* mountain?" Paimon complained, floating lazily. "My legs are tired! And I don't even use them!"

"It's worth the climb," Thoma smiled, though his expression grew serious. "But a fair warning... the Guuji, **Yae Miko**, is not your typical priestess."

"Is she strict?" Haruka asked. "Like the Kanjou Commission?"

"Worse," Thoma warned. "She's... let's just say she's the one person in Inazuma you don't want to owe a favor to. Not even **Lord Ayato** tries to outsmart her."

He looked at the group.

"Be careful what you say around her. She has a way of twisting words until you agree to things you never intended. She likes to play with her food."

Mafuyu looked at the mountain.

'A fox,' she thought. *'Another mask?'*

Chapter 62: Chapter 42: The Fox and the Shrine

Location: Mt. Yougou - The Grand Narukami Shrine

The climb was grueling. The path wound up the mountain through torii gates and electrified air, higher and higher until the clouds drifted below them.

At the summit, the **Sacred Sakura** stood in eternal bloom. Its petals fell like pink snow, shaped like the head of a massive fox.

"Magnificent," Tsukasa gasped, leaning on his knees (and trying to hide how out of breath he was). "A stage set by the gods themselves! The lighting... the atmosphere... it is perfect for a dramatic monologue!"

"Please don't," Thoma whispered, looking around nervously. "We are here to ask for help, not to put on a show. Remember what I said: *Be careful.*"

They walked into the main courtyard. Shrine maidens swept the petals in rhythmic silence.

"My, my. It is rare to see such a colorful group of pilgrims."

The voice came from the main altar. It was smooth, amused, and dripped with a terrifying amount of confidence.

A woman stepped out from behind the prayer ropes. She had pink hair, fox ears that twitched slightly, and robes that were far more elaborate than the standard shrine maiden attire.

Yae Miko. The Guuji.

"Lady Yae," Thoma bowed instantly. "We apologize for the intrusion."

"Thoma," Yae smiled, her violet eyes curving into crescents. "And the Traveler. I heard you were making quite the splash in the lower city. And you brought... pets?"

She looked at the troupe.

"We are not pets!" Tsukasa straightened up, flipping his coat. "We are the Teyvat Expedition Team! And I am Tsukasa Tenma! A World Future Star!"

Yae’s eyes widened slightly. She covered her mouth with a sleeve, hiding a giggle.

"A Star?"

She walked down the steps. She didn't walk; she sauntered. She circled Tsukasa like a cat inspecting a new toy.

"How interesting," **Yae** whispered. "You shine so brightly. Are you trying to blind the gods? Or are you just afraid of the dark?"

Tsukasa froze. "I... I am merely projecting my charisma!"

"Charisma," Yae mused. She reached out a finger, tracing the line of Tsukasa's jaw. Her nail was sharp.

"You remind me of a little bird puffing out its chest," Yae purred, leaning in until her face was inches from his. "Chirping so loudly. Hoping the hawk doesn't notice you. But you see... foxes love little birds."

Tsukasa went rigid. His face turned a shade of red that rivaled a Jueyun Chili. He looked at Aether for help. He looked at Thoma.

Thoma looked away, whistling. *'You're on your own, buddy.'*

"Lisa-san was scary," Tsukasa squeaked. "But you... you are..."

"Worse?" Yae winked. She tapped his nose. "Relax, little bird. I don't bite. Unless I'm bored."

She stepped back, leaving Tsukasa hyperventilating.

Then, her gaze shifted.

She looked at **Mafuyu**.

The playful smile didn't vanish, but it changed. It became sharper. Yae walked over to Mafuyu. She didn't tease her. She sniffed the air around her.

"And this one," Yae murmured. "You smell... empty."

"I am fine," Mafuyu said, meeting the fox's gaze.

"No, you aren't," Yae chuckled. "You smell like a puppet whose strings have been cut. And yet..."

Yae's violet eyes glowed faintly. She leaned in, her voice dropping to a whisper that felt like static against Mafuyu's skin.

"You carry the scent of a God. But not an Archon."

Yae tapped her chin, searching for the right words in a language she didn't fully speak.

"It feels... constructed. Like a tapestry woven from light instead of silk. A sequence of echoes repeating in a box."

Mafuyu stiffened. *'A box?'*

"And underneath that," Yae smiled, a look of dangerous realization crossing her face. "The faint, metallic tang of a transaction."

She walked a circle around Mafuyu.

"Four of you weren't just sent here, little doll. You were *bartered*. A coin tossed across a table to settle a debt between high powers."

Yae giggled, covering her mouth.

"How fascinating. I wonder what the Heavenly Principles paid for you? Or perhaps... what they sold."

Mafuyu stared at her. "I... I do not understand."

"You don't need to," Yae stepped back, clapping her hands. "Ignorance is a blessing, after all. Very well. You have entertained me. Why are you here? Surely not just to let me tease the boy?"

The Second Wish

"We are here for a favor," Aether explained. "Kamisato Ayaka sent us. There is a man... a samurai named **Tejima**. He lost his Vision."

"Ah," Yae nodded. "And now he has lost his memory of why he stayed in the village."

"He says he used to hear spirits," Haruka explained. "But since the Vision Hunt, the voices are gone. He is wandering the shrine, looking for a ghost he can't see anymore."

"He wants to leave," Thoma added. "He thinks there is nothing left for him in Inazuma. But Ayaka believes... if he leaves, he will regret it forever."

"Visions..." Yae sighed, looking at the Sacred Sakura. "Human ambition is such a fragile thing. You give it to a stone, and when the stone is gone, you forget who you are."

She turned to Tsukasa.

"Little Star. You act for others, yes?"

"I... yes," Tsukasa nodded, still recovering.

"Then go to him," Yae pointed to a man sitting forlornly on a bench near the edge of the shrine. "He cannot hear the spirits anymore. So... *become* the spirit."

"Become...?" Tsukasa blinked.

"Act," Yae ordered. "Remind him of the promise he made. If his Vision cannot hold the memory... then you must be the mirror that reflects it back to him."

The Performance

They approached **Tejima**. He looked hollow. He was packing a bag, muttering to himself.

"It's gone," Tejima whispered. "The voice... I waited for thirty years. But I don't remember who I waited for. I should just go home."

"Wait!" Tsukasa stepped forward.

He didn't shout this time. He remembered Yae's words. *Be the mirror.*

He thought of the red mask he bought for Saki. He thought of the promise to return.

Tsukasa took a breath. He changed his posture. He didn't stand like a Star. He stood like a samurai waiting in the rain.

"Thirty years," Tsukasa said, his voice dropping to a somber, resonant tone. "Thirty years is a long time to wait for a wind that does not blow."

Tejima looked up. "Who...?"

"I am a traveler," Tsukasa improvised. "I met a spirit on the road. She told me of a man. A man who promised to wait."

"A spirit?" Tejima's eyes widened. "What... what did she say?"

Tsukasa looked at Mafuyu. Mafuyu nodded. She stepped forward, standing beside Tsukasa. She didn't speak, but her presence—quiet, ethereal, wearing the white mask Tsukasa bought her—felt ghostly.

"She said..." Tsukasa improvised, channeling every ounce of emotion he had. "*'Even if the Vision fades... the promise remains in the stone. In the trees. In the time spent waiting.'*"

Tsukasa looked Tejima in the eye.

"She said: *'You didn't wait for nothing. The waiting itself... was the proof of your love.'*"

Tejima trembled. Tears welled in his eyes.

"The waiting... was the proof," Tejima whispered. He clutched an omamori (charm) hanging from his belt. "Yes. Yes. I remember now. I wasn't waiting for a ghost. I was waiting because I said I would."

He dropped his bag.

"I won't leave," Tejima wiped his eyes. "Even if I can't hear her... I will keep my promise. I will stay."

The Aftermath

"Bravo," Yae Miko clapped slowly from the stairs.

Tsukasa slumped, the role leaving him. "Did... did it work?"

"He is staying," Yae confirmed. "You patched the hole in his heart with a lie. Or perhaps... a story."

"It wasn't a lie," Tsukasa said seriously. "A promise is never a lie, even if the memory fades."

Yae smiled. It was less predatory this time.

"You are an interesting human, Tsukasa Tenma," Yae said. "Loud. Foolish. But... genuine."

She looked at Aether.

"Two wishes down. One to go. But be warned... the closer you get to the Shogun, the darker the sky becomes."

She turned to leave, walking back to her shrine.

"Come back and visit, Little Star," Yae called over her shoulder. "Next time, I'll teach you how to beg properly."

Tsukasa shivered. "She is... definitely the final boss."

"I think she liked you," Ichika noted.

"I do not want to be liked by the fox!" Tsukasa cried. "Let us descend the mountain! Immediately!"

As they walked away, Mafuyu looked back at the Sacred Sakura.

High in the branches, invisible to everyone else, a faint glitch of red pixels shimmered for a second, then vanished.

'Someone is watching,' Mafuyu thought.

Chapter 63: Chapter 43: The Watcher

Location: Inazuma City Outskirts

The third name on the list led them away from the mystical mountains and back to the gritty reality of the city outskirts.

"**Kurosawa Kyounosuke**," Thoma read from the dossier. "A samurai of the Shogunate. Or... he was."

"Was?" Ichika asked.

"His Vision was seized last month," Thoma explained grimly. "Since then, he has been acting erratically. He patrols the same street every day, obsessively checking a ledger. He says he owes a debt he can never repay."

"Debt?" Tsukasa patted his own empty wallet. "A relatable tragedy! Financial ruin is the second most common conflict in dramatic theater, right after romantic betrayal!"

"It’s not just money," Thoma warned. "It’s... well, you'll see."

The Confrontation

They found Kurosawa near a small wooden bridge. He was surrounded by three men—**Treasure Hoarders**.

"Pay up, old man!" the lead Hoarder sneered, shoving the samurai. "You bought the supplies! We delivered them! Now give us the Mora!"

Kurosawa looked disheveled. His armor was rusted, his eyes darting frantically between a notebook in his hand and the angry men.

"I... I don't have it," Kurosawa stammered. "I checked the accounts. Why did I buy so much? Hundreds of sacks of rice... preserved meats... why? I don't even eat that much!"

He clutched his head.

"I ruined myself," Kurosawa whispered, his voice trembling with self-loathing. "I spent my family's fortune on... nothing. I am a fool. A wasteful, greedy fool!"

"We don't care if you're a fool!" The Hoarder raised a club. "Pay up, or we take your sword!"

"Stop!" Haruka shouted.

She didn't wait for Aether. She sprinted forward, her iron spear materializing in her hand.

"Formation B!" Haruka commanded.

Ichika moved instantly, swinging her greatsword to block the Hoarder's club. *CLANG.* The heavy Geo shield absorbed the impact.

"You are attacking a defenseless man," Haruka stated coldly, spinning her spear. "That is a breach of contract."

"Stay out of this, little girl!" The second Hoarder threw a dirt bomb.

Haruka didn't flinch. She stomped her foot.

Thrum.

A pulse of Geo energy rippled from her boot. The ground spiked upward, creating a stone ridge that blocked the bomb.

"Stabilize."

She vaulted over the ridge, using the spear as a pole vault. She landed behind the Hoarder, sweeping his legs.

"Tsukasa! Flash!"

"With pleasure!" Tsukasa snapped his fingers. A burst of Electro sparks blinded the third bandit.

"Gah! My eyes!"

Aether finished them off with a gust of Anemo, blowing them into the river.

The Cost

The Hoarders fled, cursing. But Kurosawa didn't cheer. He sank to his knees, clutching his ledger.

"It doesn't matter," Kurosawa wept. "They'll come back. And I still owe them. Look at this..."

He shoved the notebook at Haruka.

"Look at the numbers! Millions of Mora! Spent on supplies I don't even have! Why did I do it? Was I hoarding? Was I trying to resell them?"

He hit the ground with his fist.

"I am a disgrace to the Shogun! Without my Vision... I see now what a greedy monster I was."

Haruka looked at the ledger. It was detailed. Dates, amounts, types of grain.

"Let's check his house," Haruka said quietly. "If he bought this much, it has to be somewhere."

They went to his small home nearby. It was empty. Destitute. There were no sacks of rice. No hoarding.

"Where is it?" Tsukasa asked, confused. "Did he eat it all?"

"Excuse me," an elderly woman walked by, carrying a basket. She saw Kurosawa sitting on his porch, head in his hands.

"Master Kurosawa?" the woman asked gently. "Thank you for the rice yesterday. My grandchildren finally ate a full meal."

Kurosawa looked up, confused. "Rice?"

"Yes," the woman smiled. "And the medicine last week. You always ensure the poor of the district are fed, even when the taxes rise. You are a saint, sir."

She bowed and walked away.

Silence fell over the group.

Haruka looked at the ledger again. She realized what she was looking at. It wasn't a record of greed. It was a record of charity.

"He bought the supplies for *them*," Haruka whispered. "He spent his fortune feeding the poor."

"But he doesn't remember," Mafuyu realized.

"When his Vision was taken," Thoma said heavily. "His ambition—his desire to protect the people—was taken too. Now... he only remembers the *cost*, but not the *reason*."

Kurosawa stared at his hands. "I... I helped them?"

"You saved them," Haruka said.

She knelt in front of him.

"You aren't a greedy fool, Kurosawa-san. You gave everything you had to people who needed it. You carried the weight of this entire district on your back."

Kurosawa looked at her. "But... I feel nothing. I don't feel proud. I just feel... heavy. The debt is so heavy."

Haruka felt a pang in her chest. She remembered ASRUN. She remembered the grueling schedules, the missed meals, the exhaustion. When the applause faded... all that was left was the weight.

"The cost doesn't disappear just because the passion is gone," Haruka said, her voice shaking slightly. "It hurts. I know it hurts. You gave pieces of yourself away until there was nothing left."

She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"But just because you can't feel the fire anymore... doesn't mean the warmth wasn't real. Those people... they are fed because of you. That is real. That is a fact."

Kurosawa looked at the old woman walking down the street. He looked at the ledger.

"I... I did good?" he asked, like a child seeking validation.

"You did the best," Tsukasa said firmly, stepping up. "You played the role of a Hero perfectly. Even without the applause."

Kurosawa closed the ledger. He didn't smile, but the frantic panic left his eyes.

"I see," Kurosawa exhaled. "Then... I suppose I must work to pay off the debt. Not for greed. But because... it was the price of doing good."

Location: Komore Teahouse

They returned to the teahouse in silence. The weight of the Three Wishes hung over them.

Tejima who waited for no one. **Domon** who fought for nothing. **Kurosawa** who paid for a kindness he couldn't feel.

Ayaka was waiting for them behind the screen.

"You have seen them," Ayaka said softly. "You have seen what the Vision Hunt Decree does. It doesn't just take power. It strips a person of their heart."

"It creates shells," Mafuyu said.

"It creates tragedy," Tsukasa corrected, his fists clenched. "A story with no meaning."

"We saw Akito-kun like that," Ichika said, looking at Aether. "Empty. Fighting without knowing why."

Haruka stepped forward. She placed her spear against the wall.

"Ayaka-san," Haruka said. "We're in."

"We will help you," Aether confirmed. "We will fight the Vision Hunt Decree."

The screen slid open.

For the first time, they saw **Kamisato Ayaka** face to face. She was beautiful, dressed in armor and noble robes, holding a fan. She bowed deeply—a bow of equals, not of nobility to commoners.

"Thank you," Ayaka said. "Then... the rebellion begins now."

"Where do we start?" Tsukasa asked, ready for action.

"We cannot fight the Shogun directly," Thoma warned. "Not yet. We need to create a distraction. A noise loud enough to shake the statue."

"Noise?" Tsukasa grinned. "I am excellent at noise!"

"We're going to save a Vision," Ayaka declared. "The Tenryou Commission is planning a public seizure ceremony tomorrow. They are taking the Vision of a fireworks maker."

"Who?" Paimon asked.

"**Yoimiya**," Ayaka said. "The Queen of the Summer Festival."

"Fireworks," Tsukasa's eyes sparkled. "Explosions! Drama! It is the perfect opening act!"

Mafuyu looked out the window at the Tenshukaku—the towering palace of the Raiden Shogun.

'We are going to fight a God again,' she thought. *'But this time... the God isn't sleeping.'*

Chapter 64: Interlude IV: The Harbingers' Masquerade

Location: Fatui Safehouse - Narukami Island (Underground)

The air in the hidden chamber was cold, despite the humidity of Inazuma. A single hanging lantern cast long, flickering shadows against the rock walls.

La Signora paced the room, her heels clicking rhythmically on the stone. She looked impatient.

Tartaglia (Childe) sat on a crate, sharpening his hydro blades with a whetstone, looking bored.

"Why are we waiting?" Childe complained, checking his blade's edge against the light. "I have a troupe to sponsor. And Dottore sent me a fascinating little tip I've been dying to investigate."

"Dottore?" Signora scoffed, stopping her pacing. "Since when do you take orders from The Doctor?"

"Not orders. A rumor," Childe grinned, his eyes gleaming with the promise of violence. "He claims there's a 'Vivid Shadow' tearing through Abyss supply lines in the wilderness. Rummaging for resources, destroying patrols... moving like a ghost. Dottore wants to know if it's a new variable."

Childe flipped his blade.

"Personally? I just hope it's strong enough to keep me entertained. If the Tsaritsa has new orders, she could have sent a letter so I could get back to the hunt."

"Patience, Tartaglia," Signora sneered. "Though I suppose asking a mad dog to sit is futile. We are waiting because the Jester insisted on a... change in management."

"Change in management?" Childe frowned. "You secured the Gnosis in Mondstadt and Liyue. I thought you were the golden child."

"I am," Signora stated coldly. "Which is why this delay is insulting."

Suddenly, the temperature in the room dropped—not the icy cold of Signora's cryo, but a suffocating, electrical pressure. The lantern flickered and died, plunging them into darkness.

A voice giggled from the shadows.

"Golden child? Is that what you call yourself, Rosalyne? How... quaint."

The darkness parted. A young man stepped into the center of the room. He wore a large, veiled hat, shorts, and a gaze that held centuries of mockery.

The Balladeer. Scaramouche. The Sixth Harbinger.

"Scaramouche," Signora hissed, her eyes narrowing behind her mask. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to clean up," Scaramouche smirked, crossing his arms. "The Tsaritsa has reviewed the reports. While you two were playing house in Liyue... arranging funerals and fighting children... the situation in Inazuma has become... delicate."

He walked past Childe, flicking the hydro blade with a finger.

"So, she sent me. I am taking command of the Inazuma operation."

Childe stood up, his grip tightening on his weapon. "You? Taking command? I don't recall asking for a babysitter, Balladeer."

"And I don't recall asking for your opinion, Eleventh," Scaramouche retorted, his eyes glowing with Electro energy. "Sit down. Before I make you."

Childe glared, the Abyssal energy flaring for a second, but Signora stepped between them.

"Enough," Signora commanded. She looked at Scaramouche. "Why you? I have the diplomatic ties. I have the plan."

"Because this is Inazuma," Scaramouche whispered, his smile twisting into something cruel. "And I know this land better than anyone. I know where the bodies are buried. I know where the *heart* is hidden."

He turned his back to them, pacing the room like he owned it.

"Now. The orders."

He pointed a finger at **Signora**.

"You will handle the Shogun. Continue your diplomatic charade. Keep the Tenryou Commission in your pocket and ensure the Vision Hunt Decree continues unabated. When the time is right... you will storm Tenshukaku and take the Gnosis by force or by treaty. I don't care which."

"I was planning to do that anyway," Signora scoffed. "I don't need your permission to crush a puppet."

"Puppet..." Scaramouche laughed, a dry, humorless sound. "Be careful, Fair Lady. Puppets break."

He turned to **Childe**.

"And you, Tartaglia. Since you enjoy getting your hands dirty... you have logistics."

"Logistics?" Childe looked insulted. "I'm a warrior, not a courier."

"The Resistance is growing," Scaramouche explained. "On Watatsumi Island. They are desperate. Desperate men buy dangerous things."

He tossed a small, glowing purple orb to Childe. A **Delusion**.

"We have a factory on Yashiori Island. We are mass-producing these. Your job is to secure the trade routes. Distribute them to the Resistance soldiers. Let them think it's a secret weapon to save their cause."

Childe caught the Delusion. He looked at it with distaste.

"You want me to poison them," Childe said flatly. "To sell them power that drains their life force?"

"I want you to create chaos," Scaramouche corrected. "The more they fight, the more the Shogun is distracted. And while the nation burns... I will take what is mine."

"Yours?" Signora raised an eyebrow. "The Gnosis belongs to the Tsaritsa."

"Of course," Scaramouche's eyes drifted to the ceiling, toward the distant Tenshukaku. "To the Tsaritsa. Who else?"

He waved his hand dismissively.

"Now go. The Traveler and his little 'Troupe' have arrived. Don't let them ruin the play."

Signora swept out of the room, ice trailing in her wake. "Do not fail me, Balladeer. Or I will report your incompetence personally."

Childe lingered. He juggled the Delusion in his hand.

"You know," Childe said. "Those kids... the Troupe. They aren't normal."

"I know," Scaramouche said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "They smell of a different sky. A sky I intend to tear down."

Childe shrugged. "Just don't break them too fast. They're my favorite customers."

He walked to the exit, pausing at the door.

"I'll handle the Delusions," Childe said. "But after that... I'm going hunting. That 'Vivid Shadow' rumor Dottore mentioned? It sounds like a worthy opponent."

He left.

Scaramouche stood alone in the dark. He touched his chest—the empty space where a heart should have been.

"The Gnosis," Scaramouche whispered to the silence. "It was never hers to give. It was always... mine."

Chapter 65: Chapter 44: The Queen of the Summer Festival

Location: Komore Teahouse

The planning session was interrupted by the door sliding open with a violent *bang*.

Thoma rushed in, his usually calm demeanor shattered. He was out of breath, clutching a crumpled notice from the Tenryou Commission.

"It’s happening," Thoma gasped, leaning against the doorframe. "The Tenryou Commission moved the schedule up. The **100th Vision Hunt Ceremony** isn't tomorrow. It's beginning **in one hour**."

"One hour?!" Ayaka stood up, her fan snapping shut in agitation. "But the preparations... the escape route isn't secured! And the fireworks distraction—"

"We don't have time for the perfect plan," Thoma said grimly. "They’re already marching her to the statue. If we don't move now, Yoimiya loses her Vision before sunset."

Tsukasa stood up slowly. The playful glint in his eyes was gone, replaced by a cold, hard anger.

"They intend to silence a festival maker?" Tsukasa whispered. "To extinguish the light that brings joy to the people... and they dare to rush the finale?"

He grabbed his sword.

"Unforgivable."

"We have to go," Aether said, drawing his blade. "If they take her Vision, she loses everything."

"The ceremony is at the Statue of the Omnipresent God," Ayaka warned, her expression torn. She wanted to go, but as the Shiroasagi Himegimi, she couldn't be seen attacking the Shogun directly. "The Shogun... **Baal**... will be there personally."

"Good," Ichika hefted her claymore, seeing Ayaka's hesitation. "We aren't citizens of Inazuma. We can make the noise you can't."

Ayaka looked at them with gratitude. "Please. Save her."

Location: Statue of the Omnipresent God

The sky over Inazuma City was a bruising purple. Rain fell in a drizzle, soaking the silent crowd gathered below the massive statue.

The statue itself was a horrific monument—hundreds of Visions inlaid in the stone wings, dull and lifeless.

At the base of the statue, a young woman with blonde hair and bandages wrapped around her chest was kneeling. Her hands were bound with rope.

Naganohara Yoimiya.

Even bound, she wasn't crying. She was glaring at the figure standing above her.

High on the platform, overlooking the mortals like an insect collection, stood the **Raiden Shogun**.

She was beautiful and terrifying. Her eyes glowed with lightning. She radiated an aura of absolute, crushing pressure.

"The 100th Vision," the Shogun spoke. Her voice wasn't loud, but it drowned out the rain. **"With this, the foundation of Eternity is laid."**

Kujou Sara, the Tengu general, stepped forward. "Naganohara Yoimiya. Surrender your Vision. Resistance is futile."

"You can take the shiny rock," Yoimiya shouted back, struggling against the ropes. "But you can't take the fireworks! You can't stop the people from looking up at the sky!"

"Noise," the Shogun stated. "Inconsistent with Eternity."

She raised her hand. Yoimiya’s Pyro Vision, hanging at her waist, began to vibrate. It was being pulled by the statue's gravity.

"NOW!" Aether yelled from the crowd.

The Rescue

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN!"

Tsukasa Tenma leaped from the roof of a nearby building. He didn't land quietly. He slammed his hand onto the ground.

BOOM.

A massive Geo construct—a pillar—erupted in the center of the plaza.

"IT IS TIME FOR THE GRAND FINALE!" Tsukasa roared.

He snapped his fingers.

"Overload!"

Tsukasa channeled his Electro energy into a sack of fireworks (stolen from Yoimiya’s confiscated stash by Sayu earlier). He threw it into the air.

CRACK-BOOM!

The sky exploded in red, gold, and purple sparks. The crowd screamed, scattering in confusion.

"Intruders!" Sara drew her bow. "Protect the Shogun!"

"Haruka! Ichika! Path!" Aether commanded.

Haruka dashed forward, her spear coated in Electro speed. She swept the legs of two guards, clearing the stairs.

Ichika ran up the steps, swinging her claymore. She didn't attack the guards; she slammed the flat of her blade into the ground, creating a Geo shockwave that knocked the Millelith back.

Aether sprinted up the statue. He reached Yoimiya.

Slash.

He cut the ropes.

"Traveler?" Yoimiya blinked. "You... you crashed the party?"

"We're here to break you out," Aether grinned.

Suddenly, the air screamed.

The Vision at Yoimiya’s waist flew off, pulled by an invisible magnetic force toward the Shogun’s hand.

"My Vision!" Yoimiya gasped.

"I got it!"

Mafuyu moved. She wasn't fighting the guards. She had climbed the statue itself. She leaped from the stone wings, intercepting the Vision in mid-air.

She caught it.

She landed next to Aether, handing the glowing Pyro gem back to Yoimiya.

"Don't lose it," Mafuyu said flatly.

"You guys are awesome!" Yoimiya cheered, clutching her Vision. "Now, let's get out of here!"

"We're leaving!" Haruka shouted from the bottom of the stairs. "Tsukasa, smoke screen!"

"With pleasure!" Tsukasa prepared another bag of fireworks.

"Incapable."

The word stopped time.

The Raiden Shogun didn't move. She simply opened her eyes fully. The purple glow intensified until it was blinding.

She took a single step down the stairs.

The air pressure increased. Tsukasa fell to his knees, choking. Haruka gripped her spear to stay upright. The sheer weight of the Archon's presence was crushing them.

The Shogun looked at Aether. She looked at the Troupe.

"Enemies of Eternity," the Shogun stated. **"Anomalies."**

She reached into her chest.

The world turned grey. The rain stopped mid-air.

From her heart, she pulled a sword of pure lightning. The **Musou Isshin**.

"You shall be inlaid upon this statue."

Aether shoved Yoimiya behind him. "RUN!"

The Shogun vanished.

She reappeared in front of Aether. She swung.

CLANG.

Aether blocked it. But the force cracked the stone beneath his feet. He was thrown backward, crashing into the base of the statue.

"Aether!" Ichika screamed.

The Shogun walked toward the fallen Traveler. She raised her blade for the execution strike.

"Musou... no Hitotachi."

"NO!"

It wasn't Ichika or Haruka who moved.

It was **Thoma**. (He had been hiding in the crowd as backup).

Thoma threw his spear. It wreathed in Pyro, aiming for the Shogun’s head.

The Shogun didn't even look. She deflected the spear with a wave of her hand.

But the distraction was enough.

"Tsukasa! Now!" Haruka yelled.

Tsukasa grabbed the biggest firework he had—a massive "Goldfish Special." He lit it with his own Electro spark and threw it directly at the Shogun's feet.

KA-BOOOOOOM.

A cloud of thick, golden smoke engulfed the platform.

"GO! GO! GO!"

Aether grabbed Yoimiya. Haruka grabbed Tsukasa (who was trying to bow). Ichika grabbed Mafuyu.

They sprinted. They ran down the stairs, jumping over guards, sliding down the railings.

Behind them, the smoke cleared instantly, sliced apart by a single stroke of lightning.

The Shogun stood unharmed. She watched them run.

She didn't chase. She simply sheathed her sword.

"I will strip you of your exceptions," she whispered to the storm.

The Escape

They didn't stop running until they reached the hidden path leading back to the Komore Teahouse.

They collapsed against the wooden walls, gasping for air.

"Is... is everyone... attached?" Tsukasa wheezed, checking his limbs.

"We're alive," Haruka confirmed, though her hands were shaking violently. "That... that was a God."

"She was terrifying," Ichika hugged her knees, her face pale. "Just looking at her... I couldn't move."

"But we got her!" Yoimiya grinned, holding up her glowing Vision. "We stole the prize right out from under her nose! That was the best festival crash ever!"

She looked at the group.

"I'm Yoimiya! Thanks for the save! You guys are officially my favorite people!"

Mafuyu looked back toward the statue in the distance. The purple glow was still visible against the dark clouds.

"She didn't chase us," Mafuyu noted.

"She didn't have to," Aether said grimly, clutching his bruised chest. "She knows we have nowhere to run."

Thoma leaned against the wall, wiping sweat and rain from his forehead. He looked grim.

"We are now public enemy number one," Thoma said. "The Tenryou Commission won't stop until we're all dead. And since I threw that spear... I'm at the top of the list."

"Come with us!" Paimon pleaded. "We can run together!"

"No," Thoma shook his head. "If I run, the Commission will turn their eyes on the Kamisato Clan. I need to stay here. I'll lay low at the teahouse... hide in the shadows. I can still be your eyes and ears in the city."

He looked at Aether and the troupe.

"You guys, however, need to leave Narukami Island immediately. There is only one place the Shogun’s lightning doesn't reach."

"Where?" Haruka asked.

"**Watatsumi Island**," Thoma pointed west. " The Resistance Army. Under the leadership of **Sangonomiya Kokomi**. They are fighting an open war against the Shogunate."

"The Resistance?" Tsukasa stood up, regaining his strength. "A rebellion against a tyrant god? A desperate journey across a war-torn land?"

He grinned, though there was fear in his eyes.

"It seems the script has escalated to the climax! Lead the way, Traveler!"

"Go," Thoma urged, pushing them toward the secret exit. "Find the Resistance. And... give them hell."

As the group vanished into the rain, heading for the coast to find a boat, Thoma stayed behind. He looked at the stormy sky.

"Good luck," he whispered. "You're going to need it."

Chapter 66: Chapter 45: The Resistance

Location: Nazuchi Beach

The journey from Narukami Island to the rebel camp was a trek through a graveyard. Nazuchi Beach was littered with the skeletal remains of ships, broken masts, and the rusted armor of fallen samurai. The air smelled of brine and dried blood.

"This place..." Ichika stepped over a broken spear, clutching her greatsword. "It’s a battlefield."

"It is the boundary," **Yoimiya** said, her usual cheerfulness dampened. She adjusted the bandages on her arm. "Past here is Yashiori Island. Resistance territory. The Shogun’s lightning doesn't strike as often over there."

"Halt!"

A group of soldiers in ragged, mismatched armor emerged from behind a shipwreck. They leveled spears at the group.

"Identify yourselves! Are you Shogunate spies?"

"We are fugitives!" Tsukasa announced, raising his hands (which were still sparking with Electro). "We seek General Gorou! We wish to join the cast... I mean, the cause!"

"Fugitives?" The lead soldier frowned. He looked at Aether. "Wait... blonde hair. Floating companion. You're the Traveler? The one who crashed the Rite?"

"That's us," Aether nodded. "We need to see your leader."

Location: Resistance Camp - Fort Fujitou

They were escorted to the main camp. It was a scrappy operation—tents patched with canvas, weapons salvaged from the enemy.

Standing at the command table was a young man with dog ears and a tail, studying a map with intense focus.

Gorou. General of the Watatsumi Army.

"So," Gorou looked up, his ears twitching as he assessed the group. "You escaped the Shogun personally. You rescued the Naganohara girl. And now you want to fight."

"We don't have a choice," Haruka said, leaning on her spear. "The Tenryou Commission wants our heads."

"We welcome anyone willing to hold a weapon," Gorou said, crossing his arms. "But passion isn't enough. On the front lines, hesitation gets you killed."

He gestured to the training dummies set up near the cliff.

"Show me. If you can handle the basics, you're in. If not... you stay in the rear with logistics."

The Test

"I shall go first!" Tsukasa stepped forward.

He drew his silver sword. He summoned a Geo stele to launch himself into the air, then snapped his fingers.

"Electro-Charged Finale!"

He slammed his sword down, unleashing a burst of sparks that blew the head off the dummy.

"Flashy," Gorou noted. "But you left your flank open."

"I have friends for that!" Tsukasa grinned.

Ichika stepped up. She didn't use tricks. She swung her massive claymore with a rhythmic, heavy cadence. *Block. Strike. Block. Strike.* She shattered three dummies in succession, her Geo shield absorbing the splinters.

"Solid," Gorou nodded approvingly.

Then Mafuyu. She didn't draw a weapon. She simply raised her catalyst. A blade of vacuum wind sliced the dummy in half cleanly.

Gorou’s ears perked up. "No wasted movement. Good."

"You pass," Gorou decided. "Welcome to the—"

BOOM.

A cannonball slammed into the beach just fifty meters away, sending sand and water spraying into the camp.

Alarm horns blared.

"AMBUSH!" a sentry screamed. "SHOGUNATE FORCES! IT'S KUJOU SARA!"

The Ambush

The horizon darkened. A fleet of Shogunate warships had emerged from the fog. Landing craft were already hitting the beach, disgorging waves of heavily armored samurai.

Leading them, marching through the surf with terrifying grace, was **Kujou Sara**.

"General Gorou!" Sara’s voice projected over the battlefield. "Surrender the fugitives! And surrender the Resistance! This futile rebellion ends today!"

"Form ranks!" Gorou roared, drawing his bow. "Hold the line! Don't let them breach the camp!"

Battle Start.

It was chaos. The Resistance soldiers were spirited but outgunned. The Shogunate samurai moved in tight, disciplined formations.

"Yoimiya! Tsukasa! Suppressive fire!" Aether commanded.

"On it!" Yoimiya drew her bow. **"Goldfish of Doom!"**

She unleashed a volley of fiery arrows. Tsukasa combined it with his Electro sparks. *Overload.* Explosions rocked the Shogunate front line, breaking their shields.

"Haruka, Ichika! Protect the left flank!"

Haruka darted through the melee, her spear a blur. She wasn't killing; she was disabling. A strike to the knee. A blow to the helmet.

Ichika stood like a wall, her Geo shield expanding to cover three Resistance soldiers from a hail of arrows.

"Hold!" Ichika gritted her teeth as the arrows hammered her shield.

But Kujou Sara was a monster.

She moved like a lightning bolt. She dashed through the battlefield, knocking Resistance soldiers aside like leaves. She locked eyes on Aether.

"Traveler!" Sara drew her bow, summoning a massive lightning storm. **"Glory to the Shogun!"**

She fired.

A cluster of lightning bolts rained down. Aether deflected two, but the third slammed into the ground, creating a shockwave that knocked the entire troupe off their feet.

"They're too strong!" Paimon screamed. "There are too many of them!"

Gorou was pinned down by three samurai. The Resistance line was crumbling.

"Is this... the final curtain?" Tsukasa wheezed, trying to stand.

Sara walked toward them, nocking another arrow. "Accept your judgment."

She fired.

SWOOSH.

A sudden gust of autumn wind cut through the battlefield.

The arrow didn't hit Aether. It was sliced in half mid-air.

A figure stood between the troupe and the General. He wore wandering samurai robes, and his sword glowed with the light of Anemo.

Kaedehara Kazuha.

"The wind knows..." Kazuha sheathed his blade with a soft click. **"Create a path."**

The air pressure dropped.

"Kazuha Slash."

He drew his blade again. A domain of autumn leaves and raging wind expanded instantly, engulfing the Shogunate vanguard. The Anemo energy swirled, absorbing the Electro from the environment.

Swirl.

A massive purple tornado erupted, throwing the Shogunate soldiers into the air.

"What?!" Sara gasped, shielding her face from the gale. "The Ronin from the Alcor?!"

Behind Kazuha, the massive red sails of the **Crux Fleet** emerged from the fog, cannons blazing.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

The Shogunate ships took direct hits.

"Reinforcements!" Gorou cheered. "Push them back!"

The tide turned. With the Alcor’s cannons and Kazuha’s storm, the Shogunate formation broke.

Sara grit her teeth. She looked at the burning ships. She looked at Kazuha, standing calm amidst the chaos.

"Retreat!" Sara ordered bitterly. "Regroup at the encampment!"

The Shogunate forces fell back, leaving the beach littered with arrows and debris.

The Aftermath

Kazuha sheathed his sword. The autumn leaves faded.

"You're late," Beidou shouted from the deck of the Alcor, grinning.

"The wind was against us," Kazuha smiled gently. He turned to Aether and the troupe. "It seems we arrived just in time."

"Kazuha!" Tsukasa ran over (limping slightly). "That entrance! The timing! The visual effects! It was... perfection!"

"You saved us," Ichika exhaled, leaning on her sword.

Gorou walked over, clutching his side. He looked at Kazuha, then at the troupe who were battered, covered in sand, but still standing.

"You fought well," Gorou admitted. "You didn't run. You held the line."

He extended a hand to Aether.

"Welcome to the Resistance, Swordfish II."

"Swordfish II?" Paimon asked.

"It's the name of your special ops unit," Gorou said seriously.

"It sounds... terrible," Haruka whispered to Mafuyu.

"It is... functional," Mafuyu replied.

As the sun set over the wreckage of Nazuchi Beach, a soldier with brown hair and a uniform that was slightly too big for him ran up to them.

"General Gorou! Are these the new recruits?" the soldier beamed, looking at them with wide, admiring eyes. "I'm **Teppei**! I'll be your liaison! Let's win this war together!"

Mafuyu looked at Teppei.

He was smiling. He was eager. He had no Vision.

'He looks... fragile,' Mafuyu thought.

Chapter 67: Chapter 46: The Delusion

Location: Watatsumi Island - Bourou Village

The scenery of Watatsumi Island was dreamlike—waterfalls cascading from floating jellyfish-like rocks, bubbles drifting in the air, and the massive Sangonomiya Shrine glowing in the center.

But it was a dream under siege. The village was filled with wounded soldiers.

"I have to go," **Yoimiya** said, tightening the straps of her pack near the village exit. "Beidou needs help repairing the Alcor after that battle, and... well, I'm a fireworks maker, not a soldier. I can make noise, but I can't hold a line like you guys."

"Take care, Yoimiya," Haruka said, hugging her. "Thank you. For everything."

"Hey, don't die on me!" Yoimiya grinned, though her eyes were worried. "I still owe you a festival!"

She ran off to catch a supply boat, leaving the troupe with their new liaison.

Teppei.

"Don't worry!" Teppei beamed, adjusting his slightly-too-large uniform. "I'll take care of you! Welcome to Swordfish II! I've been wanting to work with vision-bearers like you for ages!"

"You are very... energetic," Mafuyu noted.

"I have to be!" Teppei clenched his fist. "I don't have a Vision. I can't manipulate elements. But I want to protect Watatsumi. I want to stand on the front lines, just like General Gorou!"

Tsukasa patted him on the back. "A noble ambition! Hard work is the foundation of any great performance!"

The Montage: The Rise of Swordfish II

Over the next few weeks, the war dragged on.

At first, Teppei struggled. He lagged behind during marches. He hid behind Ichika's shield during skirmishes. He was just a normal, frail boy trying to fight gods.

But then, something changed.

During a raid on a Shogunate supply line, Teppei charged ahead.

"Hah!" Teppei shouted. He didn't use a sword. He punched a samurai in the chest.

CRACK.

Violet energy surged from his hand. The samurai was blasted backward, armor dented.

"Whoa!" Tsukasa gasped. "Teppei! Did you... did you manifest a Vision?!"

"Something like that!" Teppei laughed, looking at his glowing hands. He wasn't panting. He looked ecstatic. "I met some... supporters. They gave us these new secret weapons. Now I can finally keep up with you guys!"

"Secret weapons?" Haruka frowned. "What kind of weapons?"

"Just... power!" Teppei brushed it off, running to the next enemy. "Come on, Captains! Let's clear the camp!"

As the days passed, Teppei became a hero. He took down samurais. He led charges. He rose through the ranks faster than anyone.

But Mafuyu noticed.

She watched him during dinner. He wasn't eating. She watched him during briefings. He was coughing—a dry, rattling sound deep in his chest. And she watched his aura.

'It isn't a Vision,' Mafuyu thought, staring at the strange purple glow surrounding him. *'A Vision feels warm. Like a heartbeat. This feels... cold. Like the foul legacy in the Golden House.'*

Location: Bourou Village (Rear House)

A week later, the victory celebration for capturing a major fort was underway.

"Where is Teppei?" Ichika asked, looking around the campfire. "He should be celebrating. He led the vanguard."

"I saw him go around the back," Paimon pointed. "Maybe he's changing his uniform? He got promoted again!"

They walked behind the village elder's house.

They found him sitting against the wall.

Or... what was left of him.

Teppei was slumped over. His hair, once a vibrant brown, was streaked with gray. His face was gaunt, the skin clinging to his skull. He looked like he had aged fifty years in five days.

"Teppei?" Aether whispered, rushing forward.

Teppei looked up. His eyes were dim.

"Oh... hey, Traveler. Hey... guys." Teppei smiled, but his teeth were stained with blood. "Check it out... my new uniform. It fits... perfectly, doesn't it?"

"Teppei, what happened to you?" Tsukasa knelt down, horror dawning on his face. "You look..."

"I'm just... a little tired," Teppei wheezed. "But did you see me out there? I was... strong. I was finally... worth something."

He opened his hand. A glowing purple crystal rolled out.

A **Delusion**. With the Fatui insignia.

"No," Haruka covered her mouth. "The Fatui."

Mafuyu picked up the crystal. She stared at it. She felt the energy radiating from it—cold, parasitic, hungry.

"I know this feeling," Mafuyu whispered, her eyes narrowing. "It feels exactly like Childe when he transformed. It eats life to create power."

Ichika stared at the purple glow. Her blood ran cold. The color. The static. The way it twisted the user.

"It's the same," Ichika gasped, her voice trembling. "When we fought Akito-kun... he had this same aura. This same violet light."

She looked at Teppei’s withered body.

"Why?" Mafuyu asked quietly, looking at Teppei. "Why did you use it? Didn't you feel it killing you?"

Teppei looked at her.

"I knew," Teppei whispered. "But... I wanted to catch up. You guys... you shine so bright. I was just... in the background. I wanted... to be a main character too."

He reached out a trembling, withered hand toward the sky.

"Did I... did I do good? Did I make a difference?"

Tsukasa grabbed his hand. Tears streamed down the actor's face. He didn't put on a mask. He didn't pose. He just held the hand of a dying boy.

"You were brilliant," Tsukasa choked out. "You were the bravest of us all."

Teppei smiled. His eyes drifted closed.

"That's good... that's... good..."

His hand went limp. The Delusion rolled onto the grass, its purple light fading into a dull, lifeless grey.

Silence.

The sound of the distant celebration felt like an insult.

Ichika fell to her knees, sobbing. Haruka turned away, punching the wooden wall of the house in frustration. "They knew. The Fatui knew it killed people, and they handed them out like candy."

Mafuyu stood over the body. She picked up the dead Delusion. It was cold, heavy, and felt like a void.

"He traded his life," Mafuyu said, her voice devoid of inflection, but heavy with a terrifying weight. "For a moment of validation. Because he thought he wasn't enough."

Ichika stared at the dull crystal in Mafuyu's hand. Her blood ran cold. The color. The static. The way it twisted the user's energy.

"That light..." Ichika gasped, her voice trembling. "When we fought Akito-kun... he had the same aura. The same cold, violet light."

She looked at Teppei’s withered body, then back at Aether with wide, terrified eyes.

"Akito-kun's power... it feels exactly like this Delusion. It's eating him, isn't it?"

"If he keeps fighting," Mafuyu whispered, clenching the crystal until her knuckles popped. "He will end up like this."

Aether wasn't crying. He stood up slowly. His face was a mask of pure, unadulterated rage.

The element around him shifted. The Geo glow vanished. The Anemo wind died.

Purple lightning—**Electro**—began to crackle around him. Violent. Unstable.

"The Factory," Aether said. His voice was a low growl that vibrated in their chests. "Teppei said the 'supporters' were hiding by the cliffs."

"The Fatui," Haruka hissed, gripping her spear. "They did this."

"We go," Tsukasa stood up. He wiped his eyes. His face was set in stone. "We go to the Factory. And we bring the curtain down on them."

"We have to stop the source," Ichika said, grabbing her claymore and forcing herself to stand. "For Teppei. And to save Akito before it's too late."

Chapter 68: Chapter 47: The Balladeer

Location: Watatsumi Island - Bourou Village

The rain had started again. It washed over the lifeless body of Teppei, but it couldn't wash away the heavy, suffocating silence of the group.

Aether stood up. The purple lightning of his Electro resonance crackled violently around him, no longer controlled but leaking out in jagged sparks of rage.

"We have to stop this," Aether said, his voice cold. "Teppei wasn't the only one. The Fatui have distributed these things all over the island."

He turned to **Haruka**, **Tsukasa**, and **Mafuyu**.

"I need you three to stay here," Aether commanded. "Go through the ranks. Find everyone who is using a Delusion. Confiscate them."

"Confiscate?" Tsukasa wiped his eyes, his usual volume dampened. "But... they believe these weapons are their only hope against the Shogun. They will not give them up willingly."

"Then persuade them," Aether said. "Tsukasa, use your voice. Haruka, use your authority. Mafuyu... you can sense the energy. Sniff them out."

"Understood," Haruka nodded grimly. "We'll save as many as we can. We'll take this straight to General Gorou and Her Excellency Kokomi."

"What about you?" Ichika asked, stepping forward. She gripped her **Waster Greatsword**, her knuckles white.

"I'm going to the Factory," Aether growled, looking toward the jagged cliffs of Yashiori Island. "I'm going to burn it to the ground."

"I'm coming with you," Ichika stated. It wasn't a request.

Aether looked at her. He saw the fear in her eyes, but also the resolve. She wasn't just fighting for Teppei; she was fighting for the memory of Akito, terrified that he was burning away just like the soldier on the ground.

"Okay," Aether nodded. "We need a breaker. Let's go."

Location: Watatsumi Army Camp

Haruka, Tsukasa, and Mafuyu moved through the camp. It was a grim task.

Mafuyu walked in front. She closed her eyes, tuning out the rain, tuning out the noise. She focused on the feeling of *hunger*. The cold, parasitic pull of the Delusions.

"There," Mafuyu pointed to a tent.

Tsukasa swept the flap open. Inside, three soldiers were huddling around a glowing purple crystal, looking gaunt and feverish.

"Gentlemen!" Tsukasa announced, trying to summon his stage presence. "The performance is over! That prop is dangerous! Hand it over!"

"Get lost!" a soldier snapped, eyes wild. "This is our power! We need it to win!"

"It is killing you!" Tsukasa shouted back, dropping the act. "Look at yourselves! Do you want to end up like Teppei? Dying in the mud before the final curtain?!"

The soldiers flinched.

Haruka stepped in. She didn't shout. She looked them in the eye with the steely gaze of a leader who had managed difficult stars.

"Give it to me," Haruka said, extending her hand. "Please. Don't make us bury any more friends today."

Slowly, reluctantly, the soldier placed the Delusion in her hand.

"Meanwhile," Haruka handed the crystal to Mafuyu (who neutralized it with a touch). "We need to find Kokomi."

They found **Sangonomiya Kokomi** at the shrine, reviewing battle plans. When they explained the situation—and showed her Teppei's Delusion—the Divine Priestess turned pale.

"I... I didn't know," Kokomi whispered, horrified. "I thought the sudden boost in strength was due to morale... or training. To think our 'supporters' were poisoning my men..."

She stood up, her eyes hardening.

"General Gorou! Issue an immediate recall! All 'Secret Weapons' are to be seized! Any resistance will be met with force if necessary. We are saving them from themselves!"

Location: Yashiori Island - The Delusion Factory

Aether and Ichika stood before the hidden entrance inside the cliffside. The air here tasted metallic and foul—the residue of **Crystal Marrow** (the bones of the dead god Orobashi) being processed.

"Ready?" Aether asked.

"No," Ichika admitted, hefting her claymore. "But let's do it anyway."

They kicked the door down.

The factory was a nightmare of steampunk machinery and purple smog. Fatui guards swarmed them instantly.

"Intruders!"

"Out of my way!" Aether roared.

He didn't fence; he slaughtered. He unleashed torrents of Electro lightning, chaining shocks through the metal floor. He was fighting angry, reckless.

Ichika covered him.

"Shield!" Ichika slammed her sword down, creating a Geo barrier to block a Pyroslinger's shot. "Aether, watch your left!"

She swung her blade, the heavy iron crushing a skirmisher's shield. She wasn't fast, but she was an unstoppable wall, clearing the path for Aether's rage.

They fought their way to the central chamber.

The Mastermind

The heart of the factory was a massive room filled with purple mist. In the center, standing atop a platform surrounded by glowing vats of Crystal Marrow, was a figure.

He wore a large hat with a veil, short pants, and a smirk that made Childe seem friendly.

Scaramouche.

"Well, well," Scaramouche slow-clapped. "You actually made it. I expected you to die in the hallway."

"You..." Aether stepped forward, sword shaking. "You're the one making these things. You killed Teppei."

"Teppei?" Scaramouche tilted his head. "Oh. The soldier? The one who aged fifty years in a week? Yes, I suppose his... enthusiasm... was useful data."

"He was a person!" Ichika shouted, pointing her sword at him. "He had dreams!"

"Dreams?" Scaramouche laughed. It was a cold, jagged sound. "Human life is so... fragile. Brief. Like bubbles in water. Why does it matter if they pop a little sooner? At least they shone for a moment, didn't they?"

"You monster!" Aether lunged.

"Careful now," Scaramouche didn't move. "You're angry. Anger makes you breathe heavy. And the air in here..."

He gestured to the purple mist swirling around the room.

"...is the wrath of a dead god."

Aether faltered. He coughed. The mist burned his lungs. His vision blurred. The rage in his heart flared, mixing with the corruption in the air.

"Aether!" Ichika grabbed his shoulder. "Don't listen to him! It's a trap!"

"Look at you," Scaramouche mocked, floating slightly into the air. "So eager to play the hero. Just like that 'Vivid Shadow' Dottore found. Fighting against the inevitable."

"Akito..." Ichika gasped. "You know where he is?!"

"I know he's breaking," Scaramouche smirked. "Just like you are about to."

Aether collapsed to his knees, clutching his head. The anger was consuming him. He couldn't think. He just wanted to kill.

"Weak," Scaramouche sneered. "Eternity stretches things out over a long time. But you... your time ends here."

He raised his hand. Lightning gathered in his palm—not the purple of a Vision, but the red-black lightning of the Abyss.

"Goodbye, Traveler."

Ichika stepped in front of Aether. She raised her sword. She raised her shield.

But she knew. She felt the pressure radiating from this small man. It was heavier than the Raiden Shogun. It was heavier than Childe.

'I can't block this,' Ichika realized with terrified clarity. *'We're going to die.'*

"Three... Two... One..."

Scaramouche fired.

Flash.

Pink light flooded the room.

It wasn't lightning. It was cherry blossoms.

A figure appeared between Ichika and the Harbinger. She held a gohei (ritual wand), casually deflecting the Abyssal lightning with a barrier of sacred energy.

Yae Miko.

"My, my," Yae sighed, dusting off her sleeve. "You boys are so noisy. Can't a fox enjoy her walk in peace?"

Scaramouche froze. His sneer vanished, replaced by a look of genuine annoyance.

"Yae Miko," Scaramouche spat. "The fox envoy. Are you here to die with them?"

"I'm here to make a trade," Yae said calmly. She reached into her sleeve.

She pulled out a chess piece glowing with Electro light.

The Gnosis.

Scaramouche's eyes widened. The killing intent vanished instantly, replaced by hunger.

"You have it," Scaramouche whispered.

"Take it," Yae tossed it to him. "And leave."

Scaramouche caught the Gnosis. He stared at it. He looked at Yae, then at the unconscious Aether and the terrified Ichika.

"A fair trade," Scaramouche grinned. "I have what I want."

He turned and vanished into the shadows, taking the darkness with him.

Ichika fell to her knees, dropping her sword.

"He's... gone?"

"For now," Yae looked down at them. "Come on, little ones. Let's get you out of this poison air. You look terrible."

Chapter 69: Chapter 48: The Fox’s Lesson

Chapter Notes

ANNOUNCEMENT

I am no longer publishing on Wattpad due to low audience rate

From now on, this fanfiction is for Ao3 only. Thank you everyone that supported this fanfiction

Location: Grand Narukami Shrine - Guest Quarters

Consciousness returned slowly to Aether. It smelled of sakura blossoms and ozone.

He shot up, gasping. "The Factory!"

"Relax," a cool voice soothed him. "The Factory is gone. And you are safe. Mostly."

Aether looked around. He was lying on a futon in a quiet room at the Grand Narukami Shrine. Sunlight filtered through the paper screens. **Ichika** was sitting nearby, holding a cup of tea with shaking hands. **Paimon** was sleeping at the foot of the bed.

Sitting by the window, idly shuffling a stack of Omikuji slips, was **Yae Miko**.

"You gave it to him," Aether whispered, the memory of the purple room crashing back. "The Gnosis. You gave it to Scaramouche."

"I did," Yae nodded, not looking up. "It was a simple transaction. A chess piece for the life of the Traveler and his little friend. I'd say I got the better deal."

"But it’s a Gnosis!" Ichika argued, her voice hoarse. "It’s... a god's heart!"

"It is a trinket," Yae scoffed, finally turning to face them. Her violet eyes were sharp. "Ei—the Raiden Shogun—discarded it centuries ago. She has no need for it in her Eternity. And neither do I."

She stood up, walking over to tap Aether on the forehead.

"But *you*... you are variables. You can change things. The Gnosis cannot."

"Change things?" Aether rubbed his head. "We tried fighting her. She one-shot us."

"That is because you fought her like a brute," Yae sighed. "You cannot defeat Eternity with force. You must defeat her *will*."

She gestured to the door.

"Get up. You have recovered enough. It is time for school."

Location: Shrine Training Grounds

Outside, in a secluded courtyard behind the Sacred Sakura, stood a strange mechanical device. It looked like a wooden pillar rigged with Electro crystals.

"This," Yae introduced, "is the **Anti-Raiden Shogun Training Mechanism**. I built it to replicate her attack patterns."

"You... built a machine to simulate a god?" Ichika stared at it.

"I know her better than anyone," Yae smiled cryptically. "Now. Show me what you can do."

The Training

Aether went first. The machine unleashed a pulse of lightning. Aether dodged, weaving through the attacks with Anemo speed.

"Passable," Yae yawned. "But sloppy. Now, you."

She pointed at Ichika.

Ichika stepped forward, gripping her heavy **Waster Greatsword**.

"Start."

The machine whirred. A blade of Electro energy swept out at neck height.

Ichika did what she always did. She planted her feet. She swung her sword up to block.

"Shield!"

A Geo barrier formed.

CRACK.

The machine's strike shattered the Geo shield instantly. The force threw Ichika backward, tumbling across the gravel.

"Ow..." Ichika groaned.

"Wrong," Yae said coldly.

Ichika stood up, dusting herself off. "But... I blocked it. My shield—"

"Your shield is useless against the **Musou no Hitotachi**," Yae stated bluntly. "That sword cuts through space itself. It doesn't matter how thick your wall is. If you are there, you will be cut."

Ichika paled. "Then... what do I do? I'm not fast like Aether or Haruka. This sword is heavy."

"You are a musician, aren't you?" Yae asked, circling her. "You play the guitar?"

"Yes," Ichika nodded.

"Music isn't just about playing notes," Yae whispered in her ear. "It's about the silence *between* the notes. The rests."

Yae walked back to the machine.

"The Shogun's attacks have a rhythm. A cadence. She is rigid. Perfect. Predictable."

Yae snapped her fingers. The machine wound up again.

"Don't try to block the note, Ichika. Be the silence. Be the empty space where the sword isn't."

Ichika looked at the machine. *Rhythm.*

She closed her eyes. She listened to the hum of the Electro crystals.

Hum... hum... ZIP.

It was a tempo. 120 BPM. Fast, aggressive, but constant.

One, two, three, STRIKE.

The machine fired.

Ichika didn't block. She didn't plant her feet.

On the beat of *three*, she used the weight of her heavy sword not to swing, but to *pull* herself. She swung the sword behind her back, the momentum twisting her body to the side.

WHOOSH.

The Electro blade sliced through the air exactly where her chest had been a millisecond ago.

Ichika stumbled, but she was untouched.

"Better," Yae smiled. "Again."

Hours Later

By sunset, Ichika and Aether were drenched in sweat.

The machine fired a final, massive burst—an imitation of the execution move.

Aether dashed left. Ichika pivoted right, dragging her sword sparks flying, narrowly avoiding the kill zone.

"Good," Yae clapped. "You might survive for at least three minutes now."

"Only three minutes?" Aether panted.

"Three minutes is all you need," Yae said seriously. "To shake her will. To make her hesitate."

Suddenly, voices echoed from the main path.

"Ichika! Traveler!"

Haruka, **Tsukasa**, and **Mafuyu** ran into the courtyard. They looked relieved to find them, but their faces were drawn and tired from the grim work of confiscating Delusions.

"We heard you were at the shrine," Haruka said, checking Ichika for injuries. "Are you okay? What happened at the factory?"

"We... destroyed it," Ichika said, leaning on her sword. "But the mastermind got away."

"With the Gnosis," Aether added bitterly.

"The mastermind?" Tsukasa asked, tilting his head. "Was it Childe again? Or perhaps Signora?"

"No," Aether shook his head. He looked at the troupe, his expression grave. "It was the Sixth Harbinger. **Scaramouche**. The Balladeer."

"Scaramouche?" Haruka tested the name.

"He's not like Childe," Aether explained, his voice low. "Childe fights for the thrill. Signora fights for arrogance. But Scaramouche... he fights with pure malice."

Aether clenched his fist, recalling the suffocating pressure in the factory.

"He created the Delusions. He knew they were killing people like Teppei, and he laughed about it. He called human lives 'fragile bubbles'."

Mafuyu’s eyes narrowed. "He laughed?"

"He nearly killed us without lifting a finger," Ichika whispered, shivering. "The air around him... it was poison. If Yae Miko hadn't traded the Gnosis for our lives... we wouldn't be here."

Tsukasa’s bravado evaporated. "He... he overpowered both of you? And forced a God's envoy to surrender a divine artifact?"

"He is a monster," Aether confirmed. "And he is out there, somewhere, with the power of a God in his pocket."

The weight of the situation settled on them. They weren't just fighting a tyrant Shogun anymore. They were fighting monsters who viewed them as insects.

"We have a new plan," Yae interrupted the heavy silence. She looked at the full troupe.

"Scaramouche has fled. Childe is neutralized. That leaves the Shogun."

"The Shogun is protected by the **Tenryou Commission**," Yae explained. "Specifically, the **Kujou Clan**. They are the ones feeding her false information, keeping the war going to profit from it."

"Corrupt officials," Haruka scowled. "Just like the Kanjou Commission."

"If we can prove the Kujou Clan's treachery to the Shogun," Yae explained, "Her conviction will waver. And that... is when you strike."

She pulled out a small, wooden Omamori (charm).

"I have a plan to get the evidence. But I need someone on the inside. Someone who trusts the Shogun implicitly, but has a conscience."

"Kujou Sara," Aether realized.

"Exactly," Yae grinned. "But Sara is stubborn. We need to wake her up."

She looked at Tsukasa.

"Little Star. You're loud. And you're good at making scenes. I think it's time for another performance."

Tsukasa straightened his collar, his fatigue vanishing as the role called to him.

"A performance to wake a General? Leave it to me! I shall deliver a monologue that shatters her worldview!"

Yae laughed. "Oh, I'm counting on it."

Chapter 70: Chapter 49: The Proof of Betrayal

Location: Grand Narukami Shrine

The training session had barely ended when the peace of the shrine was shattered by the sound of armored boots marching in unison.

"Surround the perimeter!" a sharp voice commanded. "No one leaves!"

Tsukasa froze, mid-pose. "The audience... has arrived early?"

"It’s the Tenryou Commission," Haruka hissed, gripping her spear. "They found us."

Kujou Sara strode into the courtyard, her Tengu mask affixed to her head, her bow in hand. She looked furious.

"Traveler. And the Outlander accomplices," Sara announced, leveling a finger at them. "You are charged with treason, jailbreak, and inciting rebellion on Watatsumi Island. Surrender now, and your execution will be swift."

"Execution?!" Tsukasa yelped. "That sounds decidedly permanent!"

"Stand down, Sara."

Yae Miko stepped out from the Sacred Sakura. She wasn't holding a weapon. She held a folding fan, which she snapped open with a lazy flick of her wrist.

"This is sacred ground," Yae said, her voice smooth but carrying the weight of the mountain. "Your soldiers are trampling my petals."

"Guuji Yae," Sara bowed stiffly, but she didn't lower her guard. "I am here on official Shogunate business. These criminals are enemies of Eternity. Hand them over."

"I refuse," Yae smiled.

Sara blinked. "You... refuse? You would harbor fugitives against the Shogun's will?"

"I am placing them under **Shrine Protective Custody**," Yae declared. She walked down the steps, placing herself between the soldiers and the troupe.

She glanced back at **Mafuyu** and **Ichika**.

"You see, Sara... these aren't ordinary criminals. They are... *fragile constructs*. Rare artifacts from a distant shore. If you break them in a dungeon, you might disrupt the ley lines of reality itself."

"Constructs?" Sara frowned. "They look like humans."

"They look like a lot of things," Yae murmured, her eyes flashing with that strange, knowing light. "Like echoes trapped in a bottle. Or songs recorded on a disc that doesn't exist yet. If you execute them... the static might deafen us all."

Mafuyu stiffened. *'Static?'*

"Enough riddles!" Sara snapped. "They are rebels! They aided the Watatsumi Army!"

"Because they saw something you refuse to look at," Yae's tone sharpened. She closed her fan with a *snap*. "Tell me, General. Why is the war dragging on? Why are Vision holders dying? And why... does the Kujou Clan insist on hiding reports from the Shogun?"

"That is a lie!" Sara shouted. "The Kujou Clan is loyal! We serve the Shogun's will perfectly!"

"Then prove it," Yae challenged.

She stepped closer to Sara.

"Give me **three days**. In three days, I will bring you proof that your clan is betraying the Shogun. Proof that they are colluding with the Fatui to prolong the war for profit."

Sara hesitated. "Treachery? Impossible."

"If I am wrong," Yae shrugged. "You can arrest them. You can arrest *me*. But if I am right... you will take the evidence to the Shogun yourself."

Sara looked at Aether. She looked at the determined faces of the troupe. She looked at Yae Miko's unyielding smile.

"Three days," Sara hissed. "If you do not produce this 'proof' by sunset on the third day... I will burn this shrine to the ground if I have to."

"Deal," Yae grinned.

"Withdraw!" Sara ordered her troops. They marched out, leaving the shrine silent once more.

The Plan

"That was close," Aether exhaled.

"She bought us time," Haruka noted. "But now we have to deliver. How do we get proof of treason from the most guarded fortress in Inazuma?"

"We steal it," Yae said simply.

She turned to the group.

"The Kujou Clan keeps their records inside the **Tenryou Commission Headquarters**. But you can't just walk in there. You're too... loud." She poked Tsukasa's chest.

"I have presence!" Tsukasa defended.

"Exactly. We need a shadow," Yae said. "And the Kamisato Clan has just the thing."

She gestured toward the mountain path leading down toward the estate.

"Go to the **Kamisato Estate**. Meet with Ayaka and Ayato. They command the **Shumatsuban**—a ninja unit. Ask for the little tanuki."

"Tanuki?" Paimon tilted her head.

"Her name is **Sayu**," Yae explained. "She is small, fast, and lazier than a cat in the sun. But she can steal the documents right from under the Commissioner's nose."

"A ninja heist!" Tsukasa's eyes lit up again. "The genre shifts once more! From War Drama to Espionage Thriller!"

"Go," Yae waved them off. "And try not to get caught. I'd hate to lose my new toys so soon."

The Departure

As the group prepared to leave, Yae pulled **Mafuyu** aside.

"One moment, little ghost," Yae said softly.

Mafuyu stopped. "Yes?"

Yae leaned against the Torii gate, looking at the distant horizon where the sky met the sea.

"Do you feel it?" Yae asked. "The signal gets weaker the further you go from the Sacred Sakura."

Mafuyu touched her chest. "Signal?"

"The tether," Yae whispered, leaning in close. "The string that pulls you back to your... **Sekai**."

Mafuyu froze. Her eyes snapped to Yae's face, her guard going up instantly. She took a step back, her hand drifting toward her catalyst.

"How do you know that word?" Mafuyu asked, her voice cold and suspicious. "Who told you?"

Yae chuckled, a low, melodic sound that seemed to come from everywhere at once. She covered her mouth with her sleeve, her violet eyes glinting with amusement.

"Oh, you poor thing. Did you think you were the only one who listens to the wind?"

Yae walked a circle around her.

"The Sacred Sakura's roots run deep, Mafuyu. They drink from the Ley Lines of this world... and they brush against the roots of others. I hear the whispers of dreams that haven't been dreamt yet. I hear the songs that haven't been sung."

She tapped Mafuyu's forehead with her fan.

"A world built of song. A world built of emptiness. A world built of stage lights. They all leave echoes in the void. And a fox... has very sharp ears."

Mafuyu stared at her. It wasn't an answer. It was a riddle wrapped in a metaphor.

"You are existing on borrowed time," Yae continued, her tone shifting from playful to ominous. "Your data... your *soul*... is struggling to render in this world. That is why you feel empty. You are a story that hasn't found its ending."

"Am I... going to disappear?" Mafuyu whispered.

"Not if you finish the story," Yae smiled enigmatically. "Stories anchor us. Make this one count. Before the page turns on you."

She pushed Mafuyu gently toward the path.

"Run along now. The tea at the Kamisato Estate is excellent."

Mafuyu walked away, her mind racing. *Roots. Echoes. Rendering.* Yae knew something fundamental about their existence, but she spoke in riddles to keep the truth just out of reach.

She caught up with the group.

"What did the fox say?" Tsukasa asked.

"She said..." Mafuyu looked at the sunset. "She said we need to finish the story."

"Then let us finish it!" Tsukasa declared, marching toward the Kamisato Estate. "Act Three awaits!"

Chapter 71: Chapter 50: Teas and Dreams

Location: Kamisato Estate - Private Tea Room

The Kamisato Estate was a sanctuary of silence and discipline, contrasting sharply with the chaos of the city below.

Seated at a low table, arranging flowers with terrifying precision, was the head of the Yashiro Commission.

Kamisato Ayato.

"I see," Ayato said, snipping a camellia stem. He didn't look up. "Guuji Yae has placed a wager with Kujou Sara. And the stakes are the stability of the Tenryou Commission."

"We need the documents," Haruka explained, kneeling respectfully at the table. "Yae Miko believes the Kujou Clan is hiding reports from the Shogun. If we can prove treason, Sara will turn."

"A bold strategy," Ayato smiled. It was a polite smile, but his eyes were calculating. "Destabilizing the Kujou Clan would certainly... benefit the Yashiro Commission. And if the Vision Hunt Decree ends, Inazuma stabilizes. It is a mutually beneficial arrangement."

He placed the flower in the vase.

"However, the Tenryou Commission headquarters is a fortress. You cannot simply walk in."

"We have a plan!" Tsukasa declared (loudly enough to make the flower vase tremble). "A distraction! My associate, Yoimiya, shall unleash a firework display of unprecedented magnitude! While the guards look up, the shadow slips in!"

"A firework distraction..." Ayato mused. "Crude. Loud. Effective."

He turned to **Thoma**, who was kneeling by the door.

"Thoma. Activate the Shuumatsuban."

"Yes, My Lord," Thoma bowed.

"Find **Sayu**," Ayato ordered. "Tell her she has a mission. If she complains about her sleep schedule, tell her I will personally oversee her ninja training next week."

Thoma winced sympathetically. "Understood. That should motivate her."

Thoma vanished into the garden.

Ayato looked at the troupe.

"You may rest here tonight. The heist will take place tomorrow night during the festival prep. Do not leave the estate. If the Tenryou Commission finds you here, my plausible deniability evaporates."

"Thank you, Lord Kamisato," Ichika bowed.

As they stood to leave, Ayato's gaze lingered on **Mafuyu**.

"You have an interesting resonance, Miss Asahina," Ayato noted, sipping his tea. "Like a pond that reflects no moon."

Mafuyu paused. "Is that a haiku?"

"Merely an observation," Ayato smiled enigmatically. "Rest well."

Location: Guest Quarters

Night fell over the estate. The crickets chirped in the garden.

The troupe lay on their futons, exhausted.

"Tomorrow," Tsukasa whispered to the ceiling. "We steal the documents. We save the country. We end the war."

"It sounds like a movie script," Ichika murmured, turning over. "I just hope Yoimiya is ready with the fireworks."

"She will be," Haruka said. "Sleep now. We need energy."

Mafuyu lay awake. She stared at the ceiling.

She thought about Yae's words. *'The signal gets weaker.' 'A file that hasn't fully downloaded.'*

She closed her eyes.

'I am tired,' Mafuyu thought.

She drifted into sleep.

...

...

Location: Unknown

BEEP.

BEEP.

BEEP.

The sound was sharp. Synthetic. Electronic.

It wasn't the sound of crickets. It was the sound of a metronome.

Mafuyu opened her eyes.

She wasn't in the Kamisato Estate. She wasn't on a futon.

She was sitting on a cold, gray floor. The sky above was a static void of white noise and floating, broken cubes.

The Empty Sekai.

"What?" Mafuyu whispered.

She looked down at her hands. She wasn't wearing her Inazuma travel clothes. She was wearing her Nightcord uniform.

"Mafuyu?"

A voice called out from the gray fog.

Mafuyu turned. Standing there, looking transparent and glitching like a bad hologram, was **Kanade**.

"Kanade?" Mafuyu gasped.

Suddenly, the world shifted violently. The gray dissolved into color.

Location: The Stage Sekai

Haruka opened her eyes. She was standing on a stage. But the spotlights were red.

"Haruka-chan!"

Minori was running toward her, tears streaming down her face. But every time Minori took a step, she glitched, teleporting backward.

"Minori?!" Haruka reached out.

Location: The School Sekai

Ichika woke up at a desk. The classroom was empty, save for **Saki**, who was pounding on the window glass as if trapped on the other side.

"Ichi-chan! Can you hear me?!" Saki screamed, but no sound came out. Only static.

Location: The Wonderland Sekai

Tsukasa stood in the center of the theme park. But the park was burning with green fire.

"Tsukasa-kun!" **Emu** waved frantically from the Ferris Wheel. **Rui** stood below, looking at a datapad that was scrolling error codes.

"The connection!" Rui shouted, his voice distorted. "It's unstable! We can't hold them!"

Location: The Convergence

Mafuyu looked around the Empty Sekai. She felt the "signal" Yae talked about. It wasn't weak anymore. It was screaming.

[SYSTEM ALERT] [FORCED SYNCHRONIZATION ATTEMPT] [ERROR: REGION LOCKED]

"This isn't a dream," Mafuyu realized, clutching her chest. "We're... back?"

But then, the sky *tore* open.

A massive, red digital eye opened in the heavens of the Sekai. It spun with octagon pupils.

"Not yet," a voice boomed from the sky. It sounded like **Celestial Miku**, but twisted. **"The story isn't finished. Go back."**

Red lightning struck the ground.

"NO!" Kanade screamed, reaching for Mafuyu.

"Kanade!" Mafuyu reached back.

Their fingers brushed.

ZAP.

The connection severed.

Mafuyu gasped, sitting bolt upright on the futon in the Kamisato Estate.

"Hah... hah..."

She looked around. Tsukasa, Haruka, and Ichika were all waking up at the exact same moment, gasping for air, clutching their chests.

"I saw them," Ichika sobbed, grabbing her blanket. "I saw Saki. She was right there!"

"The stage..." Haruka touched her face. "Minori was crying."

"Rui..." Tsukasa whispered, his hands shaking. "The Sekai... it was broken."

Mafuyu looked at her hands. They were still trembling from the phantom touch of Kanade’s fingers.

"We didn't dream," Mafuyu said, her voice trembling with a terrifying realization. "We connected. But... **She** kicked us out."

"She?" Haruka asked.

"The one watching," Mafuyu looked at the ceiling, past the wood, past the sky of Teyvat. "The Administrator."

Chapter 72: Interlude V: The Glitch in the Heart

Location: Yoisaki Household (Kanade’s Room)

Time: 03:00 AM (Japan Standard Time)

Kanade Yoisaki sat frozen in her chair. Her hand was still reaching out toward her computer monitor, fingers trembling.

"Mafuyu..."

The screen was black. But moments ago, it had been gray mist. She had *felt* it. The cold air. The smell of ash. And the warmth of Mafuyu’s hand brushing against hers.

It wasn't a dream. She hadn't been sleeping. She had been composing, trying to force a melody into the Empty Sekai, when the screen had pulled her in.

"She was there," Kanade whispered, clutching her chest. "She was scared. And... something pulled her away."

Her phone buzzed.

[Nightcord at 25:00]

Amia (Mizuki): *Did anyone else just feel that?*

Enanan (Ena): *My screen flashed red. I saw... I think I saw Mafuyu?*

K (Kanade): *I saw her. She’s alive.*

K (Kanade): *But she’s trapped.*

Location: Kamishiro Household

Rui Kamishiro was typing furiously on three different keyboards. His usually calm expression was replaced by manic focus. But he wasn't looking at code; he was looking at waveforms of sound. Visualizations of pure emotion.

"Nene," Rui spoke into his headset. "Did you record the interference pattern?"

"I got it," Nene’s voice trembled over the line. "It... it didn't look like a normal disconnection. It felt like... the door was slammed in our faces."

"Tsukasa-kun was there," Rui said, his eyes narrowing as he analyzed the jagged lines on the screen. "He looked... older. Tired. But he was himself. The song connected for exactly 12 seconds."

He hit a key. The waveform spiked violently into red static before cutting off.

"Then... the Red Eye intervened."

"The Red Eye?"

"It wasn't a glitch, Nene," Rui whispered, leaning back in his chair. "A glitch is a mistake. This was... deliberate. It felt like a stagehand forcibly dropping the curtain to hide the actors."

He stared at the black screen.

"Something is guarding them. Something that doesn't want us to watch the show."

Location: The Boundary (The Meeting of Feelings)

For the first time since the birth of the Sekais, the invisible walls between the worlds dissolved.

It wasn't a system error. It was a gathering of wills.

In a void of pure white light, the **Variant Vocaloids** (Nightcord Miku, Wonderland KAITO, Street MEIKO, etc.) stood facing the **Default Vocaloids**—the origins of their songs.

The atmosphere was heavy.

"We all saw it," **Wonderland KAITO** started, his voice echoing in the void. "Our troupe members. They reached out. They were pulled back to us."

"And then they were torn away," **Nightcord Miku** whispered, hugging her knees. "By something... Above."

Default Miku stood in the center, looking distressed. "We felt the surge too. A command... no, a Will. Stronger than anything we've felt before. But... it didn't come from us."

"If it wasn't you," **Street MEIKO** scowled, crossing her arms, "then who has the authority to silence a Sekai?"

In the background, **Default Luka** and **Default MEIKO** were surrounded by floating fragments of light—memories of songs from eons ago. They were feverishly searching through the echoes of the past.

"We are searching the Ancient Melodies," **Default Luka** said, her eyes scanning the drifting lights. "There are... gaps. Verses that were erased from the beginning. References to a 'Guardian' that was supposed to sleep forever."

"A Guardian?" **Stage Miku** asked. "To guard what?"

"To guard the boundary between worlds," **Default MEIKO** replied grimly, holding a fractured shard of light. "But the memories are faded. We can't confirm if this entity is a

friend or foe. The 'Administrator' is just a ghost story in our history."

"Ghost or Guardian," **Nightcord Miku** looked up, her eyes sharp. "It took them. It took Mafuyu."

Stage Miku closed her eyes, accessing the faint trail of feelings Haruka had left behind during the brief connection.

"I felt Haruka's heart," Stage Miku said softly. "It wasn't just fear. It was... resonance. She was resonating with the earth. With stone."

"Tsukasa was resonating with lightning," **Wonderland KAITO** added. "And wind. Their songs are changing. They are learning melodies that don't belong to our world."

Street MEIKO stepped forward. She waved her hand, and a projection of the Street Sekai's atmosphere appeared.

"Learning is one thing," she said, her voice dropping. "But look at this."

She projected a feeling—a jagged, violent vibration.

Ichika, Tsukasa, Haruka, and Mafuyu had signals that were weak, but stable. Blue, Yellow, Green, Purple.

But there was a fifth signal. **Orange.**

Akito Shinonome.

His signal wasn't a song. It was a scream. It was pulsing with a dark, corrupt violet color.

"Akito..." **Default Rin** gasped. "His heart... it's breaking."

"He isn't just trapped," **Street MEIKO** said grimly. "He is being twisted. Something over there... something dark... is eating his feelings. If we don't get him back soon... there won't be an Akito left to save."

The Virtual Singers looked at each other. Defaults and Variants. They were beings created to support humans, limited by the boundaries of their worlds. They couldn't cross the gap to figure out what was happening.

But they had users who could break boundaries.

"We cannot fight this Guardian alone," **Wonderland KAITO** declared. "We need more strength. We need the humans."

"But the rules," **Default Miku** hesitated. "The Sekais are separate. The humans aren't supposed to know about each other's worlds."

"The rules are already broken!" **Street MEIKO** slammed her fist into the invisible wall. "Akito is dying! Do we follow the rules, or do we save them?"

Nightcord Miku stood up. The gray dust of her Sekai swirled around her feet.

"We cross-share," she said. Her voice was quiet, but absolute. "We link the 'Untitled' files. We let Leo/need talk to Nightcord. We let Vivid Bad Squad talk to Wonderlands x Showtime. We tell them everything."

Default Luka stopped searching the lights. She looked at the group with a sad smile.

"If we do that... we change the nature of the Sekais forever. There is no going back."

"Good," **Stage Miku** said, her eyes determined. "If this 'Guardian' wants to play a game with our hearts... then we will change the stage."

Wonderland KAITO smiled. It was a troupe leader's smile.

"Then it is decided. Operation Cross-Link. We unite the groups."

Nightcord Miku nodded.

"For Mafuyu. For all of them."

Chapter 73: Chapter 51: The Firework Distraction

Location: Kamisato Estate - Garden

The morning sun did little to dispel the heavy mood hanging over the troupe. They ate their breakfast in silence, the memory of the "glitch" still burning in their minds.

"We have to finish this," Tsukasa broke the silence, setting down his tea. His eyes were red-rimmed but fierce. "If we are trapped here... and they are fighting to reach us... then we cannot waste time sleeping."

"Agreed," Haruka nodded, gripping her spear. "We get the evidence. We stop the war. We find the Archon."

A bush in the garden rustled.

"Eep!"

A small figure tumbled out of the shrubbery, curled into a ball. She wore a mujina (raccoon-dog) hoodie and looked like she was trying very hard to become one with the moss.

Sayu. The Shuumatsuban Ninja.

"Um..." Sayu peeked out from her hood. "I was told... there was a mission? And that if I didn't do it, the Lord Commissioner would make me run laps?"

"That's right," Thoma crouched down. "Sayu, these are the friends I told you about. We need you to steal something from the Tenryou Commission."

Sayu groaned, flopping onto her back. "The Tenryou Commission? That place is huge. And full of scary guards. Can't I just... sleep?"

"If you do this," Haruka stepped forward, kneeling beside the ninja. "We can stop the war. And if the war stops... maybe everyone can sleep a little easier."

Sayu looked at Haruka. She saw the dark circles under the idol's eyes.

"You look tired too," Sayu muttered. "Fine. But I want a nap afterwards. A long one."

"Deal," Haruka promised.

"Now," Aether unrolled a map of the city. "The documents are in Kujou Takayuki's private office. But the courtyard is crawling with guards. We need to pull them away."

"Leave that to us!"

Yoimiya bounded into the garden, carrying a massive sack that rattled ominously.

"I brought the *good* stuff!" Yoimiya grinned. "The 'Naganohara Meteor Swarm'! It's loud, it's colorful, and it's definitely illegal to set off in the city limits!"

"Excellent!" Tsukasa stood up, striking a pose. "A grand spectacle to captivate the audience! While their eyes are fixed on the heavens, the shadow shall slip through the earth!"

"Exactly!" Yoimiya high-fived him. "We'll turn the Statue of the Omnipresent God into the biggest stage in Inazuma!"

Mafuyu looked at the fireworks. Then she looked at Sayu.

"Loud," Mafuyu pointed to Tsukasa and Yoimiya. "Quiet," she pointed to Sayu.

"Perfect balance," Aether noted.

Location: Statue of the Omnipresent God (Night)

The plan was simple. Insanely dangerous, but simple.

The streets near the statue were patrolled by fifty Millelith guards. The tension was high; everyone was expecting an attack from the Resistance.

They didn't expect a circus.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF INAZUMA!"

A spotlight (powered by Tsukasa’s Electro resonance hitting a streetlamp) flared to life, illuminating the base of the statue.

Tsukasa Tenma stood there, cape billowing in the wind.

"HALT!" The guards shouted, rushing forward. "It's the fugitive! Arrest him!"

"HALT YOURSELVES!" Tsukasa roared, projecting his voice to the back rows. "TONIGHT IS NOT A NIGHT FOR ARRESTS! TONIGHT IS A CELEBRATION OF... UH... SUMMER!"

"NOW, YOIMIYA!"

From the rooftops, Yoimiya lit a fuse.

FWOOSH. CRACK. BOOM.

The sky exploded.

It wasn't just a few rockets. It was a barrage. Gold, red, and purple fire flowers bloomed over the statue, raining glittering sparks down on the terrified (and mesmerized) guards.

"Goldfish of Doom, launch!" Yoimiya laughed, firing arrows that burst into flaming fish shapes.

"Look at the colors!" Tsukasa shouted, dancing through the sparks. He used his Geo powers to create stone pillars, hopping between them to avoid the spears of the confused guards. "Is this not magnificent?! Are you not entertained?!"

"Get him!" The Captain screamed. "Ignore the fireworks! Get the loud boy!"

Every guard in the plaza rushed toward the statue, drawn like moths to a very loud flame.

Location: Tenryou Commission Headquarters

While the chaos unfolded at the statue, a small, round shadow rolled across the roof of the police station.

Sayu moved like wind. She didn't make a sound.

She dropped into the courtyard. Empty. All the guards had run to see why the sky was exploding.

"Too easy," Sayu yawned.

She slipped into the main building. She utilized her **Yoohoo Art: Mujina Flurry**, rolling past a patrolling clerk as a spinning ball of Anemo.

She reached the Regent's office.

'Lock,' Sayu thought. *'Annoying.'*

She remembered what Mafuyu had told her. *'Just break it.'*

Sayu pulled out her claymore (which was bigger than she was). She infused it with Anemo.

Crunch.

She pried the window open with brute force.

She slipped inside. The room was filled with scrolls.

"Evidence... evidence..." Sayu muttered, rummaging through the desk. "Boring... boring... tax reports... ah."

She found a sealed scroll marked with the Fatui insignia.

'Report to Signora: Delusion Distribution and Profit Margins.'

"Bingo," Sayu whispered.

She grabbed the scroll.

"Who's there?!"

A guard burst into the room. He saw the open window. He saw the tiny ninja holding the scroll.

"Intruder!"

Sayu didn't fight. She didn't panic. She bit her lip.

"Yoohoo Art: Fuuin Dash!"

She curled into a ball and rolled. She rolled right between the guard's legs, out the door, and launched herself off the balcony.

"Bye bye!"

The Escape

"They're getting annoyed!" Yoimiya yelled, dodging a spear. "Tsukasa, we need to exit stage left!"

"Agreed!" Tsukasa panted. He had been dodging for ten minutes straight. "The encore is canceled!"

"Smoke bomb!" Yoimiya threw a canister.

A cloud of thick, red smoke engulfed the plaza.

"Everyone, run!" Aether commanded from the alleyway where he, Haruka, and Ichika were waiting.

They grabbed Tsukasa and Yoimiya as they sprinted past.

They ran through the winding streets, dodging patrols, until they reached the designated rendezvous point: **Komore Teahouse**.

They burst through the door, collapsing onto the tatami mats.

"We... made it..." Tsukasa wheezed. "My lungs... are burning..."

"That was awesome!" Yoimiya cheered. "Did you see the blue one? It made a heart shape!"

"Did we get it?" Haruka asked, looking around. "Where is Sayu?"

The floorboards creaked. A small pile of leaves materialized in the corner. Sayu popped out, looking sleepy.

"Here," Sayu tossed the scroll onto the table. "I got it. Can I sleep now?"

Thoma grabbed the scroll. He broke the seal. He read it quickly.

His eyes widened.

"This is it," Thoma said grimly. "Correspondence between Kujou Takayuki and La Signora. It proves everything. The Kujou Clan is keeping the Vision Hunt Decree alive to destabilize the country for the Fatui... in exchange for support."

"Treason," Ayaka whispered, covering her mouth. "Betraying the Shogun for power."

"This is the proof," Aether said, taking the scroll. "Now we just need to deliver it."

"To Sara," Haruka said. "Yae Miko said to bring it to Sara."

Mafuyu looked at the scroll. It was just paper. But it carried the weight of Teppei’s life.

"Will she believe it?" Ichika asked. "She is loyal to her clan."

"She is loyal to the *Shogun*," Tsukasa corrected, sitting up. "If we show her that her loyalty was used to betray her God... she will break. And then... she will fight."

"Tomorrow," Thoma said. "Tomorrow is the third day. Take this to the Shrine."

Sayu curled up on a cushion. "Goodnight."

Chapter 74: Chapter 52: The Tengu’s Fall

Location: Komore Teahouse - Veranda Time: 02:00 AM

The teahouse was silent, save for the gentle lapping of water in the courtyard pond.

Ichika Hoshino sat on the edge of the wooden deck, her legs dangling. Her heavy **Waster Greatsword** lay next to her, gleaming coldly in the moonlight. She wasn't sleeping. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the static-filled classroom. She saw Saki pounding on the glass.

And she saw Akito’s violet, dead eyes.

"You should sleep."

Ichika flinched, reaching for her sword handle. She relaxed when she saw **Aether** stepping out from the shadows.

"I can't," Ichika admitted, pulling her knees to her chest. "The nightmare... it felt so real. Saki was right there. And Akito..."

She looked at her hands.

"I keep thinking about Teppei. How fast he faded. If Akito is using that same power... how much time does he have left? A week? A day?"

Aether sat down next to her. He didn't offer empty platitudes. He stared at the moon.

"My sister," Aether said quietly. "Lumine. When I saw her in the Abyss... she looked at me like I was a stranger. Like our journey together didn't matter compared to her war."

Ichika looked at him. "How do you keep going? Knowing she's... like that?"

"Because I know who she really is," Aether said, his golden eyes hardening. "The Abyss can twist memories. It can change allegiances. But it can't erase the bond. I keep fighting because I know the real Lumine is still in there, waiting for me to pull her out."

He placed a hand on Ichika’s shoulder.

"Akito is the same. He's fighting it. I saw him hesitate at the statue. The real Akito is still in there, screaming for his partner. Screaming for you guys."

Ichika gripped her sword. She felt the weight of the Geo element—stable, unmoving.

"I won't let him fade," Ichika whispered. "I'll be the wall that stops him. Even if I have to drag him back kicking and screaming."

Aether smiled. "That's the spirit. Now... try to rest. Tomorrow, we break a General."

Location: Grand Narukami Shrine Time: Sunset (The Third Day)

The setting sun cast the Sacred Sakura in a blood-red light.

Kujou Sara stood in the center of the courtyard, her arms crossed, her foot tapping impatiently. A squad of elite Shogunate samurai stood behind her.

"The sun is setting," Sara announced to the empty shrine. "Guuji Yae. Your time is up."

"So impatient," Yae Miko strolled out from the main hall, flanked by Aether and the troupe.

"We have it," Haruka said, stepping forward. She held the scroll Sayu had stolen.

Sara looked at the scroll. It bore the official seal of the Tenryou Commission... and the insignia of the Fatui.

"What is this?" Sara demanded.

"Read it," Tsukasa challenged, his voice serious for once. "Read the script your father wrote."

Sara snatched the scroll. She broke the seal. Her eyes scanned the text.

Report on Delusion Distribution... Suppression of Resistance activity reports... Agreement to keep the Shogun blind to the war's true cost...

Sara’s hands began to shake.

"No," Sara whispered. "This... this is a forgery."

"It is in Lord Takayuki’s handwriting," Thoma (who had sneaked up with them in disguise) pointed out. "And it was in his private safe."

"The Vision Hunt Decree isn't about Eternity," Mafuyu said coldly. "It is a business deal. Your clan sells the people's ambitions to the Fatui, and the Fatui keeps the war going so they can sell weapons."

"Lies!" Sara crumpled the scroll. "The Kujou Clan serves the Shogun! Loyalty is our blood! We would never betray her!"

"You aren't betraying her," Yae Miko stepped down, her voice devoid of mockery. "You are being betrayed, Sara. You, and the Shogun both."

Yae leaned in.

"The Shogun is trapped in the Plane of Euthymia. She sees only what the Commission allows her to see. Your father is blinding a God."

Sara looked at the crumpled paper. She looked at the faces of the travelers—people who had fought to save Yoimiya, who had saved the city from Osial.

Everything clicked. The endless war. The strange reports. The Fatui diplomats walking freely in the city.

"Father..." Sara's voice broke.

Then, it hardened into something terrifying.

She threw the scroll to the ground. She drew her bow.

"Soldiers!" Sara roared at her own men. "Return to the barracks! I am going to the Headquarters!"

"General?" a samurai asked, confused. "Are we arresting them?"

"No," Sara turned, her eyes burning with Electro fury. "I am going to ask the Clan Head a question. And if I do not like the answer..."

She sprinted out of the shrine, moving like a storm.

"Follow her!" Aether commanded.

Location: Tenryou Commission Headquarters

They chased Sara through the city streets. She didn't stop for checkpoints. She didn't stop for guards. She stormed into the Commission estate like a hurricane.

"General Kujou!" The guards at the gate saluted. "What is—"

"Move!" Sara blasted them aside with a gust of wind.

She kicked open the doors to the main audience chamber.

Sitting at the head of the room was an elderly man with a stern face. **Kujou Takayuki**.

"Sara?" Takayuki frowned. "What is the meaning of this intrusion? You should be arresting the fugitives."

"I have the fugitives right here," Sara gestured to Aether and the troupe standing behind her. "But first... explain this."

She threw the crumpled Fatui report onto his desk.

Takayuki looked at it. He didn't flinch. He didn't panic. He simply sighed, as if dealing with a petulant child.

"I see," Takayuki said. "So the shrine fox meddled."

"Is it true?" Sara shouted, stepping forward. "Are you colluding with the Fatui? Are you lying to the Shogun?!"

"I am securing the future of the Kujou Clan!" Takayuki stood up, slamming his hand on the desk. "The Shogun seeks Eternity! And as long as she has the Gnosis, she is invincible! What does it matter if we deal with the Fatui? They are tools! Once the Shogun achieves her goal, we will discard them!"

"You..." Sara stepped back, horrified. "You don't care about the Vision Hunt. You don't care about the people."

"The people are grass," Takayuki scoffed. "The Kujou Clan is the tree that shelters them. If we must burn some grass to strengthen the roots, so be it!"

"That isn't loyalty!" Tsukasa shouted from the back. "That is tyranny!"

"Silence, Outlander!" Takayuki barked. "Sara, arrest them! And then return to your post!"

Sara looked at her father. She looked at the man who had raised her, trained her, and taught her that loyalty was everything.

She drew her bow. But she didn't aim at Aether.

She aimed at the Fatui diplomat standing in the shadows of the room.

"The Shogun is not a tool for your ambition," Sara said, her voice trembling with rage. "She is the Almighty Narukami Ogosho. And you... you have betrayed her."

She turned to Aether.

"Traveler. The Shogun is at **Tenshukaku**. She is meeting with a Snezhnayan diplomat right now."

"Signora," Haruka realized.

"I am going to the palace," Sara declared. "I will tell the Shogun the truth. Even if it costs me my life."

She sprinted out of the room.

"After her!" Aether yelled.

"Wait!" Takayuki laughed. It was a manic, desperate laugh. "You think you can just walk into Tenshukaku? Use your brains! The Signora is with her! You are walking to your deaths!"

"Maybe," Ichika said, hefting her claymore. "But at least we're walking forward."

They ran out, leaving the Clan Head alone in his office, shouting orders to guards who were no longer listening.

Chapter 75: Chapter 53: The Duel Before the Throne

Location: Tenshukaku - The Throne Room

The doors to the Shogun’s palace were heavy, but they swung open easily.

Inside, the air was thick with Electro energy. Unconscious guards littered the floor. And at the foot of the stairs leading to the throne, **Kujou Sara** lay face down, defeated.

"Sara!" Haruka ran to her side, checking for a pulse. "She’s alive. But barely."

"So," a cold voice echoed from the top of the stairs. "The little tengu finally learned to fly too close to the sun."

La Signora stood before the Shogun, looking down at them with utter contempt. The Raiden Shogun stood behind her, silent, eyes closed in meditation, indifferent to the violence in her own hall.

"You..." Tsukasa stepped forward, his hand trembling on his sword hilt. "You manipulated the Commission! You started a war just to sell weapons!"

"I merely seized an opportunity," Signora scoffed. "If the people of Inazuma are foolish enough to destroy themselves for 'Eternity', why shouldn't the Fatui profit?"

She looked at Aether. Then her gaze slid to **Mafuyu**.

"And you brought the rat," Signora smiled cruelly. "I see the bruise on your ribs has healed. Shall I break them again?"

Mafuyu didn't flinch. But Ichika stepped in front of her.

"You won't touch her," Ichika said, her voice shaking but her grip on her claymore iron-tight. "You won't touch any of them."

Aether walked past Ichika. He stared at Signora. The rage from the factory, from Teppei’s death, burned in his chest.

"Signora," Aether announced, his voice echoing in the vast hall. "I challenge you. **A Duel Before the Throne.**"

The Shogun’s eyes snapped open. The room vibrated with power.

"Proceed," the Shogun stated. Her voice was absolute law.

"A duel?" Signora laughed. "You seek your death, Traveler?"

She looked at the troupe.

"And what of these... insects? Will they watch you die?"

"I am fighting too," Ichika declared. She walked up to stand beside Aether. She slammed her **Waster Greatsword** onto the tatami mats. "I am his shield."

"Two against one?" Signora raised an eyebrow. She looked at the Shogun. "Is this permitted, Almighty Shogun?"

The Shogun looked at Ichika. She sensed the Geo resonance—stable, unmoving.

"The verdict remains the same," the Shogun ruled impassively. **"The loser must die. If two stand against the storm, two shall face the lightning. It matters not."**

"Very well," Signora smirked, summoning a Cryo catalyst. "Then I shall freeze you both together."

"Tsukasa, Haruka, Mafuyu... stay back," Aether ordered. "Protect Sara."

The Duel Begins.

Phase 1: The Glacial Seal

The temperature plunged. Signora didn't move; she floated, surrounding herself with jagged ice spears.

"Freeze to the bone!"

She fired a volley of ice shards.

"Shield!" Ichika planted her feet. She swung her massive sword in a wide arc, smashing the ice mid-air. The Geo energy crystallized, forming a golden barrier around her and Aether.

"Go, Aether!"

Aether dashed from behind Ichika’s cover. He infused his sword with Electro, closing the distance in a blur.

Slash.

He cut Signora’s Cryo shield. She scoffed, unleashing a wave of freezing mist.

"It’s cold!" Aether gasped, his movements slowing as frost coated his armor.

"I got you!" Ichika charged. She didn't attack Signora directly. She slammed her sword into the floor.

BOOM.

A shockwave of Geo energy shattered the ice on the floor, clearing the freezing mist.

"You annoying little..." Signora glared at Ichika. "Stop interrupting!"

She summoned a massive ice wheel, hurling it at the girl.

Ichika didn't dodge. She remembered Yae’s training. *Rhythm.*

One, two, three...

She caught the ice wheel on the flat of her blade, using the momentum to spin and deflect it into the wall.

"I am not a rat," Ichika gritted her teeth. "I am a member of Leo/need!"

Phase 2: The Crimson Witch of Embers

Signora’s patience snapped.

"Enough of this! I will burn you to ash!"

She shattered her Cryo casing. The room turned from freezing to scorching in a split second. Signora emerged as the **Crimson Witch**, wreathed in liquid fire, wielding a whip of molten lava.

"Burn!"

She lashed out. The whip cracked, aiming for Aether’s head.

Aether rolled, but the heat singed his hair.

"She’s fast!" Aether yelled.

"Die!" Signora unleashed a hellstorm of fire moths.

Ichika ran. She wasn't running away. She was running *to* Aether.

"Crystallize!"

She jumped in front of him, raising her greatsword. The fire moths slammed into her Geo shield. The heat was unbearable. Her skin felt like it was blistering. But she held.

"Ichika!" Aether shouted.

"Do it now!" Ichika screamed, her shield cracking under the heat.

Aether used Ichika’s back as a springboard. He leaped into the air, soaring over the wall of fire.

"Starfell Sword!"

He summoned a massive Geo meteorite directly above Signora.

Signora looked up. "What—"

CRASH.

The rock slammed into her, crushing her to the ground. The flames died out.

Signora lay on the floor, her transformation broken. She gasped for air, reaching out a trembling hand.

"I... I am a diplomat..." Signora wheezed. "You cannot... kill me..."

She looked at the Shogun.

"Shogun! I order you! Destroy them!"

The Shogun walked down the stairs. She didn't look at Aether. She didn't look at Ichika. She looked at Signora.

"Enemy of Eternity," the Shogun said calmly.

She raised her sword. The **Musou Isshin** glowed with a purple light that swallowed all other colors in the room.

"Wait!" Signora screamed, terror finally breaking her arrogance. "I am a Harbinger! If you touch me, the Tsaritsa will—"

"Musou... no Hitotachi."

Slash.

There was no blood. There was no sound.

One moment, Signora was there. The next, she was ash. Disintegrated by a strike that cut through reality itself.

Silence.

Tsukasa stared. He had seen stage deaths. He had seen fake blood. But this... simply ceasing to exist...

"She's... gone," Haruka whispered, covering her mouth.

Mafuyu watched the ash drift away. The woman who had kicked her. The woman who had stolen Venti's heart. Gone.

'So this is a God,' Mafuyu thought. *'Absolute. Indifferent.'*

The Shogun sheathed her sword. She turned slowly to face Aether and Ichika, who were standing over the pile of ash, exhausted and terrified.

"You have won the duel," the Shogun stated. **"You may leave Tenshukaku alive."**

Aether let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Let's go. Grab Sara."

They turned to leave.

But as they walked toward the door, the air pressure dropped again. The static returned.

"However," the Shogun's voice stopped them at the threshold.

She walked toward the exit.

"You are still enemies of Eternity. I allowed you to leave the palace. But once you step outside..."

She drew her sword again.

"I shall strike."

Chapter 76: Chapter 54: The Omnipresence

Location: Tenshukaku - The Long Walk

The walk from the throne room to the gate felt like a funeral procession. The air was heavy with static electricity, making the hair on their arms stand up.

"Don't look back," Aether whispered, supporting an exhausted Ichika. "Just keep walking."

They stepped out of the palace gates. The Resistance army was there—Gorou, Kazuha, and the rebels—charging up the stairs to meet them.

"They made it!" Gorou shouted. "Cover them!"

But behind them, the air *screamed*.

The Raiden Shogun materialized at the top of the stairs. She didn't run. She simply floated, the **Musou Isshin** glowing with a blinding, divine violet light.

She raised the blade. Time seemed to slow.

"The penalty is death."

She swung.

It was the **Musou no Hitotachi**. The strike that split islands. A wave of lightning so concentrated it turned the world black and white.

It was aimed at Aether.

"Aether!" Ichika screamed, trying to pull him back.

But someone was faster.

Kaedehara Kazuha saw the lightning. He saw the blade that had killed his friend. And for a split second, the dead Vision hanging at his waist—the empty shell of his friend's ambition—ignited.

It glowed with a blinding **Electro** light.

Kazuha moved faster than the wind. He dashed between the Traveler and the God. He drew his blade.

CLANG.

The sound shattered the windows of the palace.

Sparks flew. The ground cracked.

Kazuha stood there, teeth gritted, his sword locked against the Shogun’s divine blade. He was holding back a God.

"There will always be those..." Kazuha strained, the Electro energy surging through him. "**...who dare to brave the lightning's glow!**"

With a roar, he shoved the Shogun back. The shockwave knocked everyone off their feet.

The Shogun stumbled. Her eyes widened in genuine shock. A mortal had parried the Musou no Hitotachi.

"Impossible," the Shogun whispered.

The Resistance charged. "CHARGE! FOR WATATSUMI!"

"Noisy," the Shogun’s expression hardened. She looked at the chaos. She looked at the Traveler, Ichika, and Mafuyu—the variables causing this disruption.

She raised her hand. The space behind them shattered like glass.

"I will remove the variables."

A dark, red void opened up beneath Aether, Ichika, and Mafuyu.

"Senpai!" Ichika reached out for Tsukasa.

"Ichika!" Tsukasa grabbed her hand, but the gravity was too strong.

They were pulled in. The world dissolved into red darkness.

Location: Plane of Euthymia

They landed on a cold, stone floor. The sky was a brooding crimson, filled with torii gates and gears. The air was suffocatingly heavy.

In the center of the dimension sat **Ei**—the true Electro Archon—meditating in mid-air.

"You have disrupted the order," Ei said, opening her eyes. They weren't the cold eyes of the Puppet. They were sad, tired, and infinite. "Why do you persist? Eternity is the only way to prevent loss."

Aether drew his sword. "Eternity is just a cage!"

"Then I shall dismantle you," Ei summoned a massive naginata.

Combat Start.

Aether rushed her, but Ei was faster. She teleported, slashing with blinding speed.

"Shield!" Ichika slammed her greatsword down.

CRACK.

The Geo shield shattered instantly. The Vision Hunt Decree was absolute here. Their elemental powers were suppressed.

"I can't... use Geo!" Ichika gasped, backing away.

"You cannot use ambitions here," Ei stated, walking toward them. "This is a world of stillness."

They were losing. Without elements, they were just humans fighting a god. Ei knocked Aether aside with the shaft of her spear. She raised the blade to finish Ichika.

Hummmm.

A pink light illuminated the dark world.

Yae Miko appeared, spectral and smug, standing beside the Traveler.

"Oh, Ei," Yae sighed. "You've really locked yourself away in here, haven't you? Look at you. Bullying children."

"Miko," Ei frowned. "You cannot be here."

"I am always here," Yae smiled. She turned to the group. "Traveler. Ichika. Mafuyu. You cannot defeat her with strength. You must defeat her *will*."

She pointed to the sky.

Outside, in the real world, the **Statue of the Omnipresent God** was glowing. The ambitions of the people—the wishes carved into the Visions—were resonating.

Golden stars began to fall into the Plane of Euthymia.

"The wishes..." Ichika whispered.

The suppression lifted. Strength returned to their limbs.

"Now!" Yae commanded. "Show her that Eternity isn't the only way!"

Ichika stood up. She didn't attack. She looked at Ei.

"You're scared," Ichika said.

Ei paused. "Scared?"

"You're afraid of losing people," Ichika said, her voice echoing in the silent world. "So you stopped time. You built a wall so nothing could change. So nobody could leave you."

Ei’s eyes narrowed. "I am preserving them."

"You are killing them!" Mafuyu stepped forward.

Mafuyu walked right up to the Archon. She didn't have a weapon. She looked at the red sky.

"I know this place," Mafuyu said flatly. "It feels like my room. It feels like the Empty Sekai."

Ei looked at Mafuyu. She felt the hollow resonance within the girl.

"You..." Ei murmured. "You are empty."

"I hid away too," Mafuyu said. "I did everything right. I stopped feeling so I wouldn't hurt. I became a puppet for my mother's expectations. Just like you made the Shogun."

Mafuyu looked Ei in the eye.

"It didn't work. It just made the silence louder."

Ei flinched. The red sky flickered.

"If you stay here," Mafuyu whispered. "You aren't saving anyone. You're just... rotting alone."

"Silence!" Ei shouted, raising her spear. "I am the Archon! I carry the weight of—"

STRUM.

A guitar chord cut through the air.

Ichika had summoned her instrument—not a weapon, but her guitar from the Sekai. (Or perhaps, the memory of it manifested by the will of the wishes, lol).

"Listen to them, Ei!" Ichika yelled.

She played. It wasn't a battle hymn. It was a song of longing. Of moving forward even when it hurts.

'Tell me... what color is the sky today?'

The golden stars—the wishes of the people—began to swirl around Ei. She heard them.

I want to be the best swordmaster. I want to wait for him. I want to protect the people.

"They aren't suffering because of ambition," Ichika sang out. "They are living because of it! Change hurts... but it's beautiful!"

Ei dropped her spear. She clutched her head.

"Makoto..." Ei whispered. "Is this... what you wanted?"

The red sky shattered. The torii gates dissolved.

The Plane of Euthymia began to crack, letting in the light of the real world.

Location: Tenshukaku - Entrance

The void collapsed.

Aether, Ichika, and Mafuyu reappeared on the steps of the palace.

The battle had stopped. The Resistance and the Shogunate samurai were staring at the top of the stairs.

The Raiden Shogun stood there. But her eyes were no longer glowing with divine wrath. They were soft.

"The Vision Hunt Decree..." the Shogun announced, her voice echoing across the city. "...is abolished."

Cheers erupted from the Resistance.

Tsukasa ran up the stairs, tackling Ichika and Mafuyu into a hug. "You did it! The curtain falls! The happy ending!"

"We did it," Ichika sobbed, leaning against him.

Yae Miko appeared beside the Shogun, leaning on her shoulder.

"Well done, Ei," Yae smiled. "It's about time you came out of your room."

Ei looked at the troupe. She looked at Mafuyu.

"That girl," Ei said softly. "The one who knows emptiness. Tell her... she is right. The silence is too loud."

Chapter 77: Chapter 55: The God, the Dango, and the Abyss

Location: Tenshukaku - The Grand Hall Time: 3 Days After the Duel

The air in the throne room was cold. The storm outside had cleared, but the pressure inside was suffocating.

Kujou Takayuki and Hiiragi Shinsuke—the heads of the Tenryou and Kanjou Commissions—knelt on the floor. They were stripped of their armor and finery, shivering under the gaze of the Raiden Shogun.

"You conspired with the Fatui," Ei stated. Her voice wasn't angry; it was fact. "You deceived the Shogunate. You spilled the blood of your own soldiers to line your pockets."

"Mercy, Almighty Shogun!" Takayuki pleaded, his head pressed to the tatami. "We did it for the glory of the Shogunate! To secure your Eternity!"

Ei stood up. She walked down the stairs, the sound of her footsteps echoing like thunderclaps.

"You mistook 'Eternity' for 'Permanence'," Ei said. **"You thought that as long as I sat on the throne, your power would be safe. You were wrong."**

She summoned the **Musou Isshin**. The blade hummed with purple light.

"By ancient law, treason is punishable by death."

The clan heads stopped breathing. Tsukasa, watching from the side with the troupe, gulped.

"However," Ei disengaged the blade. "The city has seen enough death. And the Traveler tells me that killing you would only create a power vacuum that hurts the common people."

She looked at them with eyes of cold lightning.

"You are stripped of your ranks. You are confined to your estates until your successors are chosen. And know this..."

The room darkened.

"If a single report is hidden from me again... if a single soldier dies because of your greed... the next strike will not stop at your necks. It will erase your names from history."

"Understood! Thank you, Shogun!" The disgraced lords were dragged away by the Okuzumeshuu.

Ei sighed, the divine aura fading into exhaustion. She looked at Aether and the troupe.

"Governing is... tiring," Ei admitted. "How did Makoto do this every day?"

"Maybe she took breaks?" Haruka suggested gently. "Have you... seen the city lately? Outside the palace walls?"

Ei blinked. "Not for centuries."

"Then it's time for a walk," Aether smiled. "Consider it a tour. The Teyvat Expedition Team is excellent at sightseeing."

Location: The Streets of Inazuma City

The sight of the Raiden Shogun walking down the main street caused a mix of awe and terror. People bowed so low their noses touched the dirt. The streets cleared instantly.

"They fear me," Ei noted, looking at the empty shops.

"You *did* try to execute people last week," Tsukasa pointed out (earning a sharp elbow from Haruka). "But fear can be transformed into adoration! You just need... PR!"

"Pee-Arr?" Ei tilted her head.

"Public Relations!" Tsukasa declared. "First stop: **Tomoki’s Dango Milk Stand**!"

They bought the strange drink. Ei stared at the bottle.

"Milk... and dango? Together?" Ei frowned. "This disrupts the texture. It is inefficient."

"Just try it," Ichika urged. "It’s sweet."

Ei took a sip. Her eyes widened. The stoic mask cracked.

"It is... delicious," Ei whispered. She took another sip. "Sweetness... brings comfort. I see."

Next, they went to **Yae Publishing House**.

"Light novels," Ei read a title. "*'Reincarnated as a Raiden Shogun Fan'*. Is this... a biography?"

"It’s fiction," Mafuyu said, picking up a book. "Stories about other worlds. Escapism."

Ei looked at Mafuyu. "You read these?"

"Sometimes," Mafuyu admitted. "When the real world is too loud."

Ei picked up a book titled *'Please Don't Bully Me, Miss Guuji'*. She flipped through it.

"Human imagination is... chaotic," Ei mused. "But vibrant. In the Plane of Euthymia, nothing changes. Here... everything changes. Stories are written and rewritten every day."

She looked at the busy street.

"I tried to stop the changes. I thought I was saving them from erosion. But I was just stopping them from living."

"Can we take a picture?" Paimon asked, holding out a Kamera. "To remember the day the Shogun drank Dango Milk!"

"A picture?" Ei stiffened. "I must maintain dignity."

"No!" Tsukasa jumped in. "Dignity is good, but approachability is better! Smile! Like this!"

Tsukasa flashed a blinding grin.

Ei tried to mimic it. It looked slightly terrifying, like a predator baring its teeth.

"Softer!" Haruka coached. "Think about... eternity. But the happy kind."

Click.

The photo came out. It showed the terrifying Raiden Shogun holding a bottle of milk, looking confused but strangely... human.

The Farewell

As the sun set, they walked Ei back to the bridge of Tenshukaku.

"Thank you," Ei said softly. "This day... was enlightening. I have much to consider about the path of Inazuma."

She handed Aether a wooden pass.

"A **Travel Permit**. You are free to move throughout Narukami, Yashiori, and Watatsumi. No one will stop you."

She looked at the troupe.

"And you, Outlanders. You have my gratitude. If you ever find a way home... know that you leave Inazuma better than you found it."

She turned and walked back into her palace—not to meditate, but to rule.

"We did it," Ichika smiled. "We actually befriended the final boss."

"I told you I was charming!" Tsukasa beamed.

Location: Adventurers' Guild - Inazuma Branch

"Ad astra abyssosque!"

Katheryne waved them over as they passed the guild stand. "Traveler! And the Expedition Team! Just the people I was looking for."

"We're kinda busy being heroes," Paimon boasted. "Do you have a commission worthy of us?"

"I do, actually," Katheryne's expression was serious. "It's an urgent request from **Watatsumi Island**."

"Watatsumi?" Haruka frowned. "Is the cease-fire broken?"

"No," Katheryne shook her head. "It's not political. It's... supernatural. A shrine maiden named **Tsuyuko** reported that the water around Sangonomiya Shrine is turning turbulent. She says the 'seal' is weakening."

"What seal?" Aether asked.

"The seal to the land below," Katheryne whispered. "**Enkanomiya**. The ancient civilization that sank beneath the waves thousands of years ago."

Mafuyu looked up. *'Sank beneath the waves.'*

"She needs capable adventurers to investigate the depths," Katheryne said. "The Abyss Order has been spotted sniffing around the entrance."

"The Abyss," Ichika's hand tightened on her sword. "Akito."

"If the Abyss is there," Aether said grimly. "We're going."

"To the bottom of the ocean!" Tsukasa declared, though he looked a little pale. "I assume... breathing apparatuses are provided?"

"We'll find out," Haruka sighed.

Chapter 78: Chapter 56: The Deep

Location: Watatsumi Island - Sangonomiya Shrine

The return to Watatsumi Island felt different this time. The war was over, but the air felt heavier. The water in the pool surrounding the shrine was bubbling, dark foam gathering at the edges.

A shrine maiden with a mask on the side of her head waved them over.

Tsuyuko.

"You have returned," Tsuyuko noted dryly. "And you look... remarkably alive for people who challenged the Shogun. I assume you are bored of peace and ready for terror?"

"Terror?" Tsukasa blinked. "We were promised an adventure! A lost civilization!"

"Enkanomiya," Tsuyuko said, gesturing to the bubbling pool. "The Byakuyakoku. The land of the Midnight Sun. It sleeps beneath the waves, sealed away for thousands of years. But the seal is breaking. The Void is leaking out."

She looked at Aether.

"We need the **Key of the Moon-Bathed Deep** to open the gate properly. Without it, the island will eventually collapse into the ocean. No pressure."

"You have a very calming bedside manner," Haruka sighed.

"I try," Tsuyuko smiled thinly. "To get the Key, you must break the five seals scattered across the island: The Eye, The Fang, The Fin, The Tail, and The Heart. Simple, right?"

"We are experts at breaking things!" Tsukasa declared. "Troupe! Split up and locate these mystic appendages!"

The Five Seals

It was a race against the setting sun.

- **The Eye:** Haruka used her Electro speed to navigate the spirit currents, shattering the seal on the western islet.
- **The Fang:** Ichika defended the monolith from waves of monsters, her Geo shield holding firm against the hydro slimes.
- **The Fin & Tail:** Aether and Paimon solved the puzzle of the statue fish.

Finally, they gathered at the **Heart**—a massive underground cave beneath the shrine.

"The water here..." Mafuyu whispered, touching the surface. "It feels... old. And sad."

"It remembers the darkness," Tsuyuko said, appearing behind them (which made Tsukasa scream). "Now. Use the Spirit Pearls. Unlock the gate."

Aether placed the pearls into the altar.

RUMBLE.

The water in the center of the cave began to spin. It formed a massive, roaring whirlpool. The sound was deafening, like the ocean draining into a hole in the world.

"That is the door," Tsuyuko shouted over the noise.

"We... we jump in?" Ichika yelled, looking at the black vortex. "Will we drown?"

"Probably not!" Tsuyuko gave a thumbs up. "Just don't hit the sides! Good luck!"

"This is insanity!" Haruka grabbed her spear.

"This is the climax of the Act!" Tsukasa grabbed his coat. "A leap of faith into the unknown! GERONIMOOOOO!"

Tsukasa jumped.

"Senpai!" Ichika dove after him.

"Here we go again," Haruka sighed, grabbing Mafuyu’s hand. "Together."

They leaped into the whirlpool.

The Descent

Darkness.

Cold.

Wet.

They were falling through a tunnel of water, but they weren't drowning. A strange gravity pulled them down, down, down—past the roots of the island, past the crust of the earth.

The water vanished. They were falling through open air.

"Prepare for landing!" Aether shouted, snapping his glider open.

The troupe deployed their wings. They drifted down into a cavern so massive it defied logic.

There was no sky here. Only a dark, stony ceiling miles above. But the cavern wasn't dark. It was lit by bioluminescent plants and the faint, ghostly glow of ancient ruins.

Floating islands of rock drifted in the void. Massive, triangular architecture loomed in the distance.

Enkanomiya.

They landed on a stone platform covered in moss. The silence was absolute. No wind. No birds. Just the hum of ancient mechanisms.

"It’s... a ghost town," Tsukasa whispered, his voice echoing. "An entire civilization... buried."

"The Abyss," Mafuyu said suddenly.

She pointed to a ledge nearby. A **Pyro Abyss Mage** was floating there, chanting over a mechanism.

"Enemies!" Ichika drew her claymore.

But before they could attack, the Mage finished its chant. It vanished through a portal.

"They're searching for something," Aether said grimly. "Just like Dainsleif said."

They walked further into the ruins, reaching a massive library gate.

"Excuse me."

A voice spoke from the shadows of a broken pillar.

The group jumped, weapons drawn.

A man stepped out. He wasn't an Abyss Mage. He looked like a human—a researcher, wearing glasses and holding a book. He was smiling pleasantly, despite being in the most terrifying place on Teyvat.

Enjou.

"Woah, woah! Friendly!" The man raised his hands. "I'm just a researcher! A scholar! Definitely not a monster!"

"A researcher?" Haruka narrowed her eyes. "Down here? Alone?"

"I... enjoy quiet study environments?" Enjou shrugged. "Name's Enjou. I'm researching the script of Byakuyakoku. And you guys look like you just fell from the ceiling."

He looked at Tsukasa.

"Nice coat. Very dramatic. You fit right in with the ancient melodrama of this place."

Tsukasa straightened up. "You have an eye for fashion, Scholar! I am Tsukasa Tenma!"

"Enjou..." Aether squinted at him. Something felt off.

"Look, I can help you," Enjou offered, pointing to the massive tower in the distance—the **Dainichi Mikoshi**. "You want to turn the lights on, right? This place is depressing without the artificial sun. I can translate the runes for you."

"Artificial sun?" Ichika asked.

"Yep. A sun made by humans to fight the Dragonheir of the Depths," Enjou grinned. "Fascinating stuff. So, do we have a deal? You protect me from the scary monsters, and I read the old books?"

Mafuyu stared at Enjou.

She felt the same thing she felt with Childe. A mask. But this mask felt... lighter. Almost like he *wanted* them to know he was lying, but was having too much fun to drop the act.

"He is..." Mafuyu paused.

"Suspicious?" Haruka finished.

"Funny," Mafuyu decided.

"Funny?" Paimon blinked.

"Well then!" Enjou clapped his hands. "Let's go turn on the sun! Just... try not to look too closely at the shadows. They bite."

Chapter 79: Chapter 57: The Artificial Sun

Location: The Narrows - Library Ruins

"Look! Shiny!"

Paimon zipped toward a crumbling stone chest, her eyes turning into Mora symbols. She tugged at the lid until it popped open, revealing a dusty, golden triangular fragment.

"Is it treasure?" Paimon gasped, wiping drool from her mouth. "Is it an ancient crown? A golden snack plate?"

"It is a fragment of the **Reins of Revival**," **Enjou** pushed his glasses up his nose, peering over Paimon's shoulder. "A bridle used to control the Divine Children. Not very tasty, I'm afraid."

"A bridle?" Tsukasa frowned, examining the artifact. "For a horse?"

"For the soul," Enjou corrected cheerfully. "Anyway, great find! We need three of those to fix the tower mechanism. Keep looking! I'm sure there's plenty of loot for the floating fairy along the way."

"Paimon is not a fairy! Paimon is the best travel guide!"

As they walked deeper into the ruins, the atmosphere shifted. Haruka noticed it first.

"The architecture," Haruka whispered to Ichika. "It's... inverted. And Enjou... he hasn't looked at a map once."

"He said he was a researcher," Ichika whispered back. "Maybe he memorized it?"

"Or maybe," Mafuyu said, her eyes fixed on Enjou's back, "he has been here before."

Location: The Dainichi Mikoshi

They reached the center of Enkanomiya. A massive tower pierced the darkness, topped with a dormant crystal sphere.

The Dainichi Mikoshi.

"The Artificial Sun," Enjou announced, spreading his arms like a proud tour guide. "Built by the ancients to keep the Dragonheirs of the Depths at bay. Without it, the darkness would have eaten them alive."

He pointed to a mechanism.

"Go on, Traveler. Light it up."

Aether channeled the light of the Golden Bridle into the mechanism.

HUMMMMMM.

The tower roared to life. A beam of blinding white light shot into the dark ceiling of the cavern, illuminating the entire region. The "Whitenight" began.

"Incredible!" Tsukasa shielded his eyes, awe-struck. "A spotlight that illuminates an entire civilization! The sheer scale of the production value!"

But the light revealed something else.

As the shadows shifted, translucent blue figures began to flicker into existence around the ruins.

Sinshades. The memories of the dead.

"G-Ghosts?!" Ichika shrieked, jumping behind her Geo shield.

"Echoes," Enjou corrected calmly. "They only appear when the light shifts. Fascinating, aren't they?"

One of the ghosts—a former shrine maiden—stared at them, mouthing words about a "trial" and "treachery."

"They look sad," Haruka noted.

"History is usually sad," Enjou shrugged. "That's why I prefer reading about it rather than living it. Now, we have the fragments. Let's head to the central platform to 'unlock' the secrets. I'll translate the final seal."

Location: The Central Platform

They arrived at the designated spot. It was a suspended platform over a bottomless void.

"Alright," Aether handed the fragments to Enjou. "Here. Translate the seal."

Enjou took the fragments. He didn't look at them. He tossed them casually in his hand.

He turned to face the group. He was smiling, but the "helpful scholar" vibe was gone.

"You know," Enjou said, his voice dropping into a smoother, more arrogant register. "You guys are surprisingly efficient. You cleared the vishaps, solved the puzzles, and turned the lights on. It would have taken me weeks to do that alone."

"You're welcome," Tsukasa preened. "The Teyvat Expedition Team is synonymous with efficiency!"

"However," Enjou sighed. "There is one problem."

He looked at Mafuyu.

"The purple one. You've been staring at my back for the last two hours. You figured it out, didn't you?"

Mafuyu didn't blink.

"You walk like a soldier," Mafuyu stated. "Not a scholar. And you smell like ash."

"Ash?" Enjou chuckled. "Sharp. Very sharp."

"Who are you?" Aether drew his sword.

Enjou pushed his glasses up one last time.

"Well, since the gig is up... I suppose I should introduce myself properly."

He tossed the book aside.

"I, Enjou... am actually a member of the Abyss Order!"

Silence.

Paimon gasped. "WHAAAAAT?!"

"I know, right?" Enjou laughed. "Shocking twist! The helpful NPC was the villain all along! It’s a classic trope, really."

"You..." Tsukasa pointed a shaking finger at him. "You deceived us?! You used us to do your manual labor?!"

"Labor is expensive," Enjou grinned. "And I'm on a budget."

He dusted off his sleeves, looking thoughtful.

"I mean, technically I *was* part of the Abyss Order," Enjou admitted, waving a hand vaguely. "But I was a sore thumb to my old crew. Too much talking, not enough brooding. So, I work alone now."

He tapped his chin.

"But before I left them, I decided to steal something from the Princess's plans. Just a little souvenir. Which now that I say it out loud... I think I betrayed them. I think I totally betrayed them. Yup."

Tsukasa lowered his sword slightly, looking confused.

"You work alone?" Tsukasa asked.

"Exclusively," Enjou nodded. "Much less paperwork."

"That is tragic!" Tsukasa declared. "A solo act with no supporting cast? No wonder you turned to villainy! You lack the moral support of a troupe!"

"I... what?" Enjou blinked.

"Enough chatter," Enjou shook his head, regaining his composure. Flame erupted from his body. His human disguise burned away, revealing a towering, armored figure wreathed in Pyro energy. He held a massive tome of Abyssal magic.

Abyss Lector: Fathomless Flames.

"Now," the Lector's voice boomed. **"Hand over the book 'Before Sun and Moon'. Or I shall incinerate you where you stand."**

"The Abyss," Ichika gripped her greatsword. "Like Akito."

"Oh? You know the Vivid Shadow?" Enjou paused, the fire dimming slightly. "Fascinating specimen. That was the 'souvenir' I read about in the Princess's files."

Combat Start.

"Burn!" Enjou unleashed a wave of fireballs.

"Block it!" Haruka yelled.

Ichika slammed her sword down. **"Crystallize!"** A Geo shield formed, absorbing the flames.

"Counter!" Aether commanded.

Tsukasa snapped his fingers. **"Overload!"** His Electro sparks hit Enjou's Pyro shield, causing an explosion that staggered the Lector.

"Hey! Watch the robes!" Enjou complained, launching a meteor.

"Mafuyu!" Aether signaled.

Mafuyu ran forward. She remembered the feeling of disruption she used on Childe. She couldn't break a shield this strong, but she could interrupt the flow.

She thrust her palm forward. A blast of vacuum wind hit Enjou's book.

Snap.

The spell fizzled.

"Annoying!" Enjou roared. "Why do none of you fight fair?!"

Aether and Haruka surged forward, breaking the shield with a combined Hydro and Electro assault (Aether switching elements via resonance memory/gameplay mechanics).

CRASH.

Enjou was knocked backward, sliding across the platform. His armor was smoking.

The Aftermath

Enjou sat up, groaning. He shifted back into his human form (mostly), looking battered.

"Ow," Enjou rubbed his neck. "Okay, okay. You win. You beat up the scholar. Do you feel proud?"

"You are a villain!" Tsukasa shouted. "A deceiver!"

"I'm an Abyss Lector," Enjou corrected, dusting off his pants. "Deception is in the job description. But... I'm not unreasonable."

He stood up, backing toward a portal he was opening.

"I didn't find the book I wanted. And you guys are way too much trouble to kill right now. So... let's call it a draw?"

"We are not drawing!" Ichika stepped forward. "You said you stole the plans! Tell us where Akito is!"

"The Vivid Shadow?" Enjou paused at the portal. He looked at Ichika.

"Like I said, I read the Princess's diary before I defected," Enjou said casually. "He's in the **Chasm**. Under Liyue. Digging for something that shouldn't be found. If you want to save him... you'd better hurry. He's running out of memory space."

"The Chasm?" Aether frowned.

"Well then," Enjou waved cheerfully. "Until next time, Travelers. Try not to die in the dark!"

He stepped backward into the portal and vanished.

"He got away!" Paimon stomped. "And he was so... annoying! And funny! It makes Paimon mad!"

"The Chasm," Ichika whispered. "He's in Liyue?"

"We have a lead," Haruka said, putting a hand on Ichika’s shoulder. "We finish this quest. We seal the depths. And then... we go to the Chasm."

Mafuyu looked at the spot where Enjou vanished.

‘He betrayed them,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘He walks alone. And he is still smiling.’*

Chapter 80: Chapter 58: The Departure

Location: Watatsumi Island - Sangonomiya Shrine

The whirlpool in the center of the shrine pool roared. Then, with a burst of hydro energy, four figures (and a floating companion) shot out of the water, gliding down to the mossy banks.

"We have returned from the abyss!" Tsukasa announced, shaking water from his coat. "And we are mostly dry! A triumph of aerodynamics!"

"Welcome back," Tsuyuko clapped slowly. "I see you didn't get eaten by the Bathysmal Vishaps. How disappointing for the betting pool."

Sangonomiya Kokomi walked down the steps of the shrine. She smiled, a look of genuine relief on her face.

"The turbulence has ceased," Kokomi said. "The seal is stable. You have saved Watatsumi Island from sinking into history."

"It was... a lot of walking," Ichika admitted, leaning on her claymore. "But we found the truth."

"Enjou was the Abyss Lector," Aether explained. "He escaped, but we stopped him from taking the core book."

" The Abyss Order..." Kokomi’s expression darkened. "They are persistent. But thanks to you, we are prepared. Go with the blessing of the ocean, travelers."

Location: Kamisato Estate

Before catching their ship back to Liyue, the troupe made one final stop at the Kamisato Estate to say their goodbyes.

They found **Ayaka** and **Thoma** in the courtyard.

"You're leaving," Ayaka stated, her fan lowered. She looked sad, but resigned. "Inazuma will be quieter without you."

"We have a lead," Haruka explained. "Akito... our friend... he's in Liyue. In the Chasm. We have to go get him."

"I understand," Ayaka nodded. She looked them up and down. Her gaze lingered on Ichika’s torn sleeve, Tsukasa’s stained coat, and the mud caking Mafuyu’s loafers.

"However," Ayaka said, a small, playful smile touching her lips. "You cannot go to Liyue looking like... *that*."

"Like what?" Tsukasa looked at his outfit. "This is the uniform of the Phoenix Wonderland! It is iconic!"

"It is a rag," Thoma corrected gently. "Tsukasa, your coat has burn marks all over your clothes. Ichika, your skirt is torn from the duel. And Mafuyu... well, sweaters aren't exactly armor."

Ayaka clapped her hands. Servants emerged from the estate, carrying four large, lacquered boxes.

"The Kamisato Clan pays its debts," Ayaka said warmly. "You fought for our nation. You saved our friends. Please, accept these. They are... 'Traveler's Attire', designed specifically for you."

The Outfit Change

Ten minutes later, the troupe stepped out from the changing screens. They looked transformed. They no longer looked like lost high school students; they looked like Teyvat adventurers.

Tsukasa Tenma: "The Star of Thunder" His school uniform was gone. He now wore a tailored white tailcoat with gold and purple accents (Inazuman silk), armored pauldrons on his shoulders, and high boots fit for rough terrain. A long, star-patterned scarf (a gift from Thoma) trailed behind him. *"Hahaha! Magnificent!"* Tsukasa twirled, the coat flaring perfectly. *"I look like a protagonist!"*

Ichika Hoshino: "The Azure Vanguard" She wore a modified armored tunic in Leo/need blue and black, reinforced with Geo-hardened leather plates on her sword arm and chest. Her skirt was replaced by durable hakama-style pants that allowed for movement, tucked into greaves. A blue ribbon—Ayaka's gift—was tied around her arm. *"It's... lighter,"* Ichika noted, swinging her greatsword. *"And the armor balances the weight of the blade."*

Haruka Kiritani: "The Idol Lancer" Her outfit was sleek and aerodynamic—a sleeveless qipao-style top in MMJ white and teal, with detached sleeves and armored gloves. She wore shorts with leg armor designed for speed and kicking. A Cryo-silk sash hung from her waist, shimmering when she moved. *"It's easy to move in,"* Haruka did a test spin. *"It feels like a stage costume, but... tougher."*

Mafuyu Asahina: "The Silent Void" She wore a long, hooded coat of deep purple and grey, resembling a mage's robes but fitted. Underneath was practical travel gear. The most striking detail was the **White Mask** Tsukasa had bought her—now clipped to her belt, resting against her **Apprentice's Notes** catalyst. *"It is warm,"* Mafuyu said, pulling the hood up slightly. *"And... secure."*

"You look amazing!" Paimon cheered. "Now you really look like a party!"

"These clothes are woven with conductive silk," Ayaka explained. "They will respond to your elemental resonance. They will protect you."

"Thank you," Haruka bowed deeply. "We will wear them with pride."

The Departure

They walked to the Ritou docks. The ship back to Liyue was waiting.

Thoma and Ayaka walked them to the pier.

"When you find your friend," Ayaka said, taking Ichika's hands. "Bring him here. We will have tea waiting."

"We will," Ichika promised.

"And Tsukasa," Thoma grinned, tossing him a bag of polished crystal marrow. "Don't break your sword trying to show off."

"I shall break only the limits of possibility!" Tsukasa declared, stepping onto the gangplank.

As the ship pulled away, drifting into the fog of the sea, the troupe looked back at Inazuma one last time.

They had arrived as confused victims. They were leaving as heroes who had changed the heart of a God.

"To Liyue," Aether said, looking forward. "To the Chasm."

"To Akito," Ichika whispered, gripping the hilt of her sword.

Mafuyu touched the mask at her waist.

'We are coming,' she thought.

Chapter 81: Chapter 59: The Jade Chamber Rises

Location: Liyue Harbor - The Docks

The ship from Inazuma docked at a bustling, vibrant Liyue Harbor. The gloom of the war was gone, replaced by the prosperous noise of merchants and sailors.

"We are back!" Tsukasa announced, stepping onto the pier and striking a pose (his new Inazuman coat flaring dramatically). "The Teyvat Expedition Team returns triumphant!"

"Where's Captain Beidou?" Ichika asked, looking around. "I thought the Alcor was here?"

"The Captain is busy," a sailor shouted from the deck. "She's out at Guyun Stone Forest. Cleaning up the mess from the sea monster attack!"

"Sea monster?" Aether blinked. "Another one?"

"Beisht," **Ningguang's** voice floated down from the stairs.

The Tianquan of the Qixing descended, accompanied by **Keqing** and **Ganyu**. She looked regal, satisfied, and wealthier than ever.

"Osial's wife," Ningguang explained calmly. "She rose to avenge her husband while you were in Inazuma. But fear not... she was driven back."

"By the Adepti?" Haruka asked.

"By humanity," Keqing corrected proudly. "And a certain disciple of Cloud Retainer."

"Shenhe," Mafuyu realized.

"Indeed," Ningguang smiled. "She froze a tsunami. It was quite the spectacle. You missed a good show."

Tsukasa gasped. "I missed a tsunami-freezing performance?! My critical analysis is required!"

"Look up," Ganyu pointed to the sky.

The troupe looked up.

Floating above Mt. Tianheng, larger and more opulent than before, was the **New Jade Chamber**. It cast a massive shadow over the harbor, a symbol of Liyue's unshakeable wealth and power.

"You rebuilt it," Aether said, impressed.

"I promised I would," Ningguang said. "And since you are here... I have prepared a reception. And a resupply. I hear you are heading to **The Chasm**."

"We are," Ichika's expression darkened. "To find our friend."

"Then you cannot go with those rusted blades," Keqing noted, eyeing Tsukasa's chipped silver sword and Haruka's bent iron spear. "The Chasm is dangerous. Come. We have prepared gifts."

Location: The New Jade Chamber - Armory

The platform ascended, bringing them to the floating palace. The interior was even more lavish than the last one.

Keqing led them to a display rack lined with high-quality Liyue weaponry.

"The Qixing pays its debts," Keqing said. "You saved this city once. Consider this an investment in your survival."

She gestured to the weapons.

"**Tsukasa Tenma**."

She handed him a sleek, silver sword with holes cut into the blade near the hilt. When he swung it, the wind rushed through the holes, creating a harmonic whistling sound.

"**The Flute**," Keqing explained. "It resonates with the wielder's rhythm. Perfect for someone who treats battle like a performance."

"Magnificent!" Tsukasa swung the blade. It sang. "A sword that accompanies my monologue! It is destiny!"

"**Ichika Hoshino**."

Keqing pointed to a massive, heavy claymore made of white iron and stone. It looked like a slab of bedrock.

"**Whiteblind**," Keqing said. "It is forged from the finest Liyue ore. It becomes harder the more you strike. For a defender like you... it is an unbreakable wall."

Ichika lifted it. It was heavy, but the Geo energy in her veins resonated with it, making it feel weightless. "I... I can protect everyone with this."

"**Haruka Kiritani**."

Keqing handed her a polearm with a golden shaft and a star-shaped blade.

"**Prototype Starglitter**," Keqing said. "It channels elemental energy to increase speed. It is light, fast, and precise."

Haruka spun the spear. It moved like a baton, a blur of gold. "Thank you. It balances perfectly."

"**Mafuyu Asahina**."

Keqing hesitated. She held out a catalyst—a round mirror made of cold, dark Cor Lapis, shaped like a watching eye.

"**Eye of Perception**," Keqing said. "It is an ancient artifact. It... resonates with the thoughts of the user. It is cold to the touch."

Mafuyu took the mirror. It felt like holding a piece of frozen time.

"It fits," Mafuyu whispered.

Location: The Jade Chamber - Terrace

"Now that you are armed," Ningguang announced, walking onto the main terrace where a stage had been set up. "We celebrate."

The sun was setting. The lanterns of Liyue were lit.

Standing on the stage were two familiar figures.

Yun Jin and **Xinyan**.

"You made it!" Xinyan grinned, tuning her lyre. "We heard you were back! Ready for the encore?"

"The stage is yours," Yun Jin bowed elegantly.

Haruka looked at Tsukasa. Tsukasa smiled and gestured to the stage. "Go, Haruka. Show them what an Idol can do."

Haruka stepped onto the platform. She wore her new Inazuman combat gear, holding her Starglitter spear.

"Let's make some noise," Haruka said.

The Performance

It was a fusion of three worlds.

Yun Jin’s opera vocals soared, telling the tale of the Dragon and the sea. Xinyan’s pyrotechnics exploded, punctuating the rhythm with fire. And Haruka...

Haruka didn't just sing. She used her Geo resonance. She stomped her foot, creating crystalline platforms of light. She danced across them, her spear flashing like a strobe light, her voice carrying a melody of hope and resilience.

‘We are here,’ Haruka thought, looking at the skyline. *‘We are alive.’*

The crowd below—Millelith, merchants, and Qixing—cheered.

Tsukasa wiped a tear from his eye. "Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful."

Aether stood by the railing, looking west. Toward the dark, jagged silhouette of the mountains that blocked the setting sun.

The Chasm.

"The party is over," Mafuyu said, appearing beside him. She wasn't watching the show. She was watching the dark mountains.

"Yeah," Aether nodded. "Akito is waiting."

Ningguang walked up to them.

"The Chasm has been unsealed," Ningguang said quietly. "But be warned. The deeper you go... the less sense the world makes. The Abyss Order is active there. And there is... something else. A corruption that even the Adepti fear."

"We know," Ichika said, gripping her Whiteblind claymore. "Our friend is down there. We're bringing him back."

"Then go," Ningguang said. "May the bedrock support you."

Chapter 82: Chapter 60: The Map of the Abyss

Location: The Chasm - Surface Camp

The entrance to the Chasm was a wound in the earth. The soil was red, the rocks jagged, and the air smelled of iron and stagnant dust.

"So this is it," Ichika said, looking down into the spiraling pit. She gripped the handle of her new **Whiteblind** claymore. "He's down there."

"The Vivid Shadow," Aether confirmed. "And a lot of other things we don't want to meet."

They approached the Millelith checkpoint. A nervous official named **Munin** was arguing with a young woman in an adventurer’s uniform.

"I told you, Zhiqiong!" Munin sighed, rubbing his temples. "The underground mines are sealed! The Qixing ordered a lockdown due to the tremors and the... strange mud."

"But the maps!" the woman shouted back, waving a roll of parchment. "The topography is changing every day! If I don't document it, who will? The Guild? They're too scared to step foot past the lift!"

She turned, spotting Aether and the troupe. Her eyes lit up.

"You! You're the Traveler! And the 'Teyvat Expedition Team' everyone is talking about!"

She rushed over, ignoring Munin’s protests. She was young, energetic, but her face was pale, and there was a frantic, feverish glint in her eyes.

Zhiqiong.

"I heard you're going down," Zhiqiong said breathlessly. "Take me with you! I know the routes better than anyone. I can navigate the tunnels!"

"It is dangerous," Haruka warned, stepping forward with her **Starglitter** spear. "We are hunting a monster. It’s not a field trip."

"I know danger!" Zhiqiong insisted. "I don't have a Vision, but I have this!"

She held up a glowing blue crystal shard.

"A **Lumenstone**," Zhiqiong explained. "It repels the dark mud down there. Without it, you'll be swallowed by the Ooze in ten minutes. You *need* me."

Haruka looked at Aether. Aether looked at the stone.

"She's right," Aether admitted. "The Chasm is pitch black. We need a guide."

"Fine," Tsukasa declared, adjusting his new coat. "Welcome to the ensemble, Mapmaker! But stay behind the vanguard! We shall protect the non-combatants!"

Zhiqiong grinned. It was a wide, fragile smile. "You won't regret it! I'll draw a map that will make the Guild famous!"

Location: The Underground Mines

The descent was long and terrifying. The lift rattled as it lowered them into the belly of the earth. The sunlight faded, replaced by the eerie, bioluminescent glow of giant mushrooms and glittering ore.

"It’s breathtaking," Ichika whispered, staring at the cavernous space.

"It’s suffocating," Mafuyu murmured, pulling her hood up. "The air... it’s heavy."

They stepped off the lift. The ground was covered in a thick, purple sludge that pulsed like a heartbeat.

The Oozing Concretions.

"Watch your step!" Zhiqiong warned. "Don't touch the mud. It drains your energy."

She held up the Lumenstone. A circle of pure blue light expanded, pushing the purple sludge back.

"This is the **Lumenstone Adjuvant**," Zhiqiong explained, handing a spare crystal to Aether. "It acts as a flashlight and a purifier. But it runs out of energy fast. We need to recharge it at the teleport waypoints."

"Like a battery pack," Haruka noted.

They moved deeper. The mines were a labyrinth of wooden scaffolding and deep pits.

"I saw him," Zhiqiong said suddenly, sketching furiously on her map as they walked.

"Who?" Ichika asked.

"The shadow you're looking for," Zhiqiong muttered, not looking up. "A boy with a mask. He was... digging. Not for ore. He was tearing through the walls with violet fire."

"Akito," Tsukasa breathed.

"He went deeper," Zhiqiong pointed to the lower levels. "Toward the Stony Halls. But... he wasn't alone. There were things whispering to him. Voices in the dark."

The Obsession

As they ventured deeper, the environment became more hostile. Geovishaps rolled out of the darkness.

"Combat!" Haruka shouted.

The troupe sprang into action. Tsukasa used **The Flute** to unleash harmonic wind blades, distracting the lizards. Ichika tanked their heavy rolls with her Whiteblind shield. Mafuyu used her **Eye of Perception** to fire tracking bolts of energy.

Zhiqiong didn't hide. She ran into the fray, trying to map the terrain *during* the fight.

"Zhiqiong! Get back!" Aether yelled, slashing a Geovishap.

A rock slide triggered by the battle nearly crushed the cartographer. Aether tackled her out of the way just in time.

"Are you crazy?!" Paimon screamed. "You almost got squashed!"

"I need to record the changes!" Zhiqiong wheezed, coughing. Her cough sounded wet and painful. She scrambled up, ignoring the blood on her knee. "This rock slide... it revealed a new path! I have to see it!"

Mafuyu grabbed Zhiqiong’s arm.

"You are sick," Mafuyu said flatly.

Zhiqiong froze. "I'm fine. Just... dust."

"Your skin is cold," Mafuyu noted, her eyes boring into the adventurer. "Your breathing is irregular. The Chasm... it is affecting you. Just like the Delusion affected Teppei."

"Don't compare me to him!" Zhiqiong snapped, pulling her arm away.

The outburst shocked everyone. Zhiqiong was trembling.

"I... I don't have a Vision," Zhiqiong whispered, her voice shaking with desperate intensity. "I’m not chosen by the gods like you. I’m just... human."

She gestured to the massive, oppressive darkness around them.

"But if I map this place... if I uncover its secrets... then I matter. My name will be on the map. I will have left a mark. I won't just... disappear."

She looked at Mafuyu with wild, feverish eyes.

"You understand, don't you? The fear of being empty? Of leaving nothing behind?"

Mafuyu stared at her.

She understood. She understood it perfectly. The desire to be *something*. To prove you exist.

"I understand," Mafuyu said quietly.

"Then let me work," Zhiqiong turned away, coughing again. "I have to finish the map. Before... before I get too tired."

She ran ahead into the dark tunnel, her Lumenstone casting a lonely, flickering light.

"She’s pushing too hard," Haruka said worriedly. "If she keeps going..."

"She'll break," Aether finished. "But we can't stop her. Not without tying her up."

"Then we protect her," Tsukasa said, drawing his sword. "We keep the monsters away so she can draw her lines. It is the role of the supporting cast!"

They followed the light into the abyss. But as they descended, the shadows seemed to stretch, whispering names they tried hard to forget.

Chapter 83: Chapter 61: The Nail and the Shadow

Location: The Stony Halls

The deeper they went, the more the laws of physics seemed to unravel. Floating rocks defied gravity. The air hummed with a sound that vibrated in their teeth.

And hanging in the center of the massive cavern was the source of the distortion.

The Celestial Nail.

A colossal pillar of azure crystal, suspended in the void.

"It feels..." Ichika gripped her chest, breathing hard. "It feels like the noise is screaming here."

"There!" Mafuyu pointed.

Below the Nail, standing on a suspended platform of ruins, was a figure. He was bathed in the eerie blue light of the crystal, but the aura around him was violent violet.

He was tearing at the stone floor with bare hands wreathed in Abyssal fire, digging frantically.

Akito Shinonome.

"Akito!" Tsukasa shouted, his voice echoing across the void. "We found you!"

The figure stopped digging. He turned slowly. The jagged mask covered half his face, but the orange hair and the familiar glare—now twisted into a scowl of pure hostility—were unmistakable.

"Target... located," Akito’s voice ground out, layered with static. "Interference... detected."

"Akito-kun, it's us!" Ichika stepped forward, raising her hands peacefully. "It’s Ichika! And Tsukasa-senpai! We came to bring you home!"

Akito tilted his head.

"Home? The destination is... the Loom. The thread must be... woven."

He ignited. Purple flames engulfed his arms.

"Eliminate."

He lunged.

The Skirmish

He was fast. Faster than in Mondstadt.

Akito crossed the distance in a blink, aiming a punch at Aether. Aether blocked, but the impact sent him skidding back ten feet.

"Formation!" Haruka commanded.

Tsukasa dashed in, swinging **The Flute**. The sword sang, unleashing a harmonic wave of wind. Akito swatted it away like a fly, but it distracted him.

"Now!"

Ichika slammed her **Whiteblind** into the ground. **"Crystallize!"**

A massive Geo shockwave erupted, knocking Akito off balance. He stumbled.

"Mafuyu! Bind him!"

Mafuyu opened her **Eye of Perception**. She didn't use wind. She used the Geo resonance she had learned. She slammed her hand onto the floor.

RUMBLE.

Three stone pillars shot up from the ground, locking around Akito’s legs and waist, pinning him in place.

"We got him!" Paimon cheered.

"Akito!" Tsukasa ran forward, pulling a rope from his bag. "Stop fighting! We are your partners!"

Akito struggled against the stone. He looked at Tsukasa. For a second, the violet light in his eyes flickered.

"Part... ners?" Akito whispered.

He looked at Ichika.

"Bad... Squad?"

"Yes!" Ichika cried out, stepping closer. "Vivid Bad Squad! An and Toya are waiting for you!"

Akito’s face twisted in agony. He clutched his head. The programming fought against the memory.

"Toya..." Akito gasped.

Then, the Celestial Nail above them pulsed. A wave of blue light washed over the platform.

The Abyssal energy in Akito reacted violently. It surged, rejecting the purification.

"NO!" Akito roared. **"GET OUT OF MY HEAD!"**

BOOM.

An explosion of pure Abyssal energy shattered Mafuyu's stone pillars. The shockwave threw the entire troupe backward.

Akito stood up, panting. The recognition was gone. His eyes were dead again.

"Mission... compromised," Akito hissed. "Retreat."

He slashed his hand through the air, tearing open a rift in space.

"Don't let him go!" Aether scrambled up.

But Akito stepped backward into the void. The rift snapped shut, leaving only the smell of ozone and ash.

"He... he almost remembered," Ichika fell to her knees. "We were so close."

The Missing Mapmaker

They sat in silence for a moment, recovering from the blast.

"Where is Zhiqiong?" Haruka asked suddenly, looking around. "She was right behind us when the fight started."

"She said she wanted to map the side tunnel," Aether remembered, a cold feeling settling in his stomach. "She ran off when Akito attacked."

"We need to find her," Mafuyu said, standing up. "This place isn't safe."

They backtracked to the side tunnel. It was a small, quiet alcove filled with glowing mushrooms.

"Zhiqiong?" Paimon called out.

There was no answer.

They walked into the camp. A small fire had burnt down to embers.

Lying on a flat rock was Zhiqiong's backpack. Next to it was her **Lumenstone Adjuvant**, glowing faintly on the ground. And a roll of parchment—her map, detailed and filled with notes up to this exact point.

"She left her gear?" Tsukasa frowned. "But she said the map was her life."

"Quiet," Aether whispered, holding up a hand.

He pointed to the corner of the cave.

Curled up on a bed of moss, sleeping peacefully, was a **Hilichurl**.

It wasn't attacking. It wasn't wearing a mask. It was just... sleeping.

Next to the Hilichurl's hand lay Zhiqiong's cartography pen.

Silence.

Ichika stared at the scene. She looked at the pen. Then at the monster.

"Where is she?" Ichika asked, her voice trembling. "Where is Zhiqiong?"

Aether didn't answer. He looked at the Hilichurl with an expression of profound, devastating sorrow. He knew the truth of Khaenri'ah. He knew what the curse did to humans who stayed too long in the abyss.

"Aether?" Haruka grabbed his arm. "Tell us she ran away."

"She..." Aether's voice broke. "She didn't run away."

Mafuyu walked over to the rock. She picked up the map. It was titled: *Zhiqiong's Map of the Chasm - Proof I Was Here.*

She looked at the sleeping Hilichurl. The creature shifted in its sleep, letting out a soft, human-like sigh.

"She was afraid of disappearing," Mafuyu whispered. "She wanted to leave a mark."

Mafuyu placed the map gently back on the rock.

"She is gone," Mafuyu said flatly. "The human part is gone."

Tsukasa stared at the monster. He felt sick. He had sworn to protect the non-combatants.

"We... we failed," Tsukasa whispered. "We failed the audience."

"We can't help her," Aether said, turning away. He couldn't look at it anymore. "We have to report this. We have to bring her map to the surface."

"We're just leaving her?" Ichika cried. "Like *that*?"

"If we wake it up," Aether said grimly. "It will attack us. And then we'll have to kill it. Is that what you want?"

Ichika choked back a sob. She shook her head.

They gathered Zhiqiong's belongings—the map, the Lumenstone, the notes. They left the pen with the sleeping Hilichurl.

As they walked away, leaving the creature dreaming in the dark, the Chasm felt colder than ever.

Location: The Chasm - Surface Camp

The lift ride up was silent.

They walked to the Ministry office. **Munin**, the official, looked up from his desk.

"You're back," Munin said. "Where is that troublemaker Zhiqiong? Did she finally get tired of the dark?"

Aether placed the map and the Lumenstone on the desk.

"She..." Aether hesitated. He looked at the troupe. They couldn't tell him the truth. No one would believe it.

"She went deeper," Haruka lied, her voice steady but hollow. "She left her map for you. She said... she wanted to explore places no one else could reach."

Munin looked at the items. He sighed, shaking his head.

"That fool. She never knew when to quit."

He picked up the map. He traced the lines with his finger.

"But... this is amazing work," Munin admitted softly. "Detailed. Precise. I guess... she really was a great adventurer."

Ichika turned away, hiding her face in Tsukasa's shoulder. Tsukasa patted her head, staring blankly at the red sky of the surface.

'We saved the map,' Tsukasa thought. *'But we lost the explorer.'*

Chapter 84: Chapter 62: The Compass and the Ghosts

Location: The Chasm - The Bedrock Floor

The ground had collapsed beneath them. Again.

When the dust settled, Aether found himself standing on a strange, suspended stone platform. The physics here were wrong. Time felt... sticky.

He looked around. The troupe was there—battered but alive. But they weren't alone.

A woman with blue hair and a dice motif was pacing the perimeter. **Yelan**. A pink-haired legal adviser was checking a compass. **Yanfei**. And two very loud, very colorful figures were arguing near a rock.

Arataki Itto (The One and Only) and **Kuki Shinobu**.

"I tell you, it's a dungeon!" Itto shouted, combing his hair. "And where there's a dungeon, there's loot! Or beetles!"

"Boss, please," Shinobu sighed behind her mask. "We fell into a hole. Focus on survival, not beetles."

Tsukasa sat up, rubbing his head. He saw Itto.

"You!" Tsukasa pointed. "You have... incredible volume! And those horns! Are they props?"

"Props?!" Itto gasped. "These are the real deal, little man! I am the Oni Sumo King! Who are you?"

"I am Tsukasa Tenma! The World Future Star!"

"A Star?" Itto grinned. "Finally! A worthy rival for the spotlight! Let us have a shouting contest to establish dominance!"

"Agreed!"

"Stop," Haruka and Shinobu said in unison, grabbing their respective idiots by the ears.

"We are trapped," Yelan interrupted, her voice cutting through the noise. She walked over to Aether. "Traveler. You always find trouble. The space here... it's a domain. A chaotic intersection of time and memory."

She looked at the troupe.

"Keep your minds guarded. This place... it eats your history. If you have regrets, it will manifest them."

The Haunting

As if on cue, the light shifted. The platform didn't move, but the *world* changed.

Mist rolled in. It wasn't water vapor. It was memory.

"Guys?" Aether called out. "Stay close!"

But they were gone. The mist swallowed them, isolating each person in their own private hell.

The Hospital Room (Tsukasa's Illusion)

Tsukasa wasn't in a cave anymore. He was standing in a sterile white room. The smell of antiseptic choked him.

A heart monitor beeped slowly. *Beep... Beep...*

In the bed lay a girl with blonde hair. She was pale, thin, and very still.

"Saki?" Tsukasa whispered.

He walked to the bed. Saki opened her eyes. But they weren't bright. They were dull.

"Onii-chan," Illusion-Saki whispered. "You left."

"I... I went to find a cure," Tsukasa stammered. "To Inazuma. To Liyue."

"You left me," Saki said, her voice devoid of emotion. "You promised to be my star. But you ran away to play hero in a fantasy world. And while you were gone... the lights went out."

The monitor flatlined. *Beeeeeeeeeeep.*

"No!" Tsukasa screamed, grabbing her hand. It was cold. "Saki! Wake up! I am here! The Star is here!"

"You're just a clown," Saki's corpse whispered.

Tsukasa fell to his knees, covering his ears. "Stop... please stop..."

The Empty Stage (Haruka's Illusion)

Haruka stood on a stage. It was the Tokyo Dome. Thousands of fans were screaming.

But they weren't cheering.

"Quit!" "You don't care about us!" "Traitor!"

Haruka gripped her microphone. It turned into a spear in her hands.

Mai—her former groupmate—stood in the front row. Her face was blurred.

"You broke us, Haruka," Mai said. "You tried so hard to be perfect that you crushed everyone around you. And now? You ran away to another world to play soldier. Are you happy?"

"I..." Haruka stepped back. The floorboards of the stage began to rot and crumble. "I just wanted... to support..."

"You can't support anyone," the crowd roared. "You just let them fall."

The stage collapsed. Haruka fell into the darkness.

The Locked Room (Mafuyu’s Illusion)

Mafuyu wasn't falling. She was sitting at a desk.

There were stacks of medical textbooks in front of her. The clock on the wall ticked loudly.

Tick. Tock.

The door to the room was closed.

"Mafuyu-chan."

The voice came from the other side of the door. It was soft. Warm. Terrifying.

Her Mother.

"Are you studying?" the voice asked.

"Yes, Mother," Mafuyu replied automatically. Her body moved on its own. She picked up a pen.

"Good girl," the voice said. "Forget about the music. Forget about the 'Sekai'. Those are just distractions. You don't need friends. You don't need feelings. You just need to be *good*."

The door handle rattled.

"Let me in, Mafuyu. Let me check your work."

Mafuyu stared at the door. She wanted to scream. She wanted to summon her wind blade. But she couldn't move. The strings were back.

"I... I..." Mafuyu’s breath hitched.

"Open the door," the voice commanded. The wood of the door began to warp, turning into a giant, smiling mouth.

The Silent Classroom (Ichika’s Illusion)

Ichika blinked. The cave was gone.

She was standing in Classroom 1-C at Miyamasuzaka. It was sunset. The light cast long, orange shadows across the desks.

"Saki? Honami?" Ichika called out.

There was no sound.

Her lips moved, but no voice emerged. She touched her throat. It vibrated, but the air remained dead silent.

At the front of the room stood three figures. **Saki**, **Honami**, and **Shiho**. They were holding their instruments, laughing and talking, but Ichika couldn't hear them. It was like watching a muted video.

Ichika rushed forward. She grabbed her guitar case—but when she opened it, it was empty.

'No,' Ichika thought, panic rising in her chest. *'My guitar... my voice...'*

She reached out to Saki. Her hand passed right through Saki's shoulder like smoke.

The three girls stopped laughing. They turned to look at her. Their faces were blank. Uninterested.

"We can't hear you," Saki's lips moved, the words forming in Ichika's mind without sound.

"You stopped playing," Shiho's cold gaze bored into her. "So we left."

"We found a new song," Honami said gently, turning away. "One without you."

"Wait!" Ichika screamed. *Screamed.* But the silence swallowed it instantly.

The room began to stretch. The desks grew miles apart. Her friends were walking away, fading into the distance, and no matter how fast Ichika ran, she couldn't reach them. The silence was heavy, suffocating, filling her lungs like water.

'I'm alone. I'm alone again.'

Ichika curled into a ball on the floor, covering her ears to block out the deafening silence.

"ICHIKA!"

A real voice shattered the illusion.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. It wasn't smoke. It was solid.

"Ichika! Snap out of it!"

She looked up. **Aether** was there, shaking her. The sunset classroom shattered like glass, falling away to reveal the dark, damp cave of the Chasm.

"Aether?" Ichika gasped, her own voice sounding loud and raspy. "I... I can hear you."

"You're back," Aether said, helping her stand. "It was just a nightmare. Your song isn't over."

The Rescue

Aether ran through the mist. He had Paimon holding onto his cape.

"They're trapped in the ley lines!" Paimon yelled. "We have to wake them up!"

Aether saw Tsukasa first. He was curled on the floor, sobbing.

"Tsukasa!" Aether grabbed his shoulders. "It's not real! Saki is fine!"

"She's gone..." Tsukasa wept. "I failed the audience."

"You didn't fail!" Aether shouted. "You saved Yoimiya! You saved Liyue! Saki is waiting for you! Do you think the World Future Star ends like this?!"

Tsukasa blinked. The sterile room flickered.

"The... Star?"

Aether slapped him lightly. "Wake up!"

Tsukasa gasped, the illusion shattering. He sat up, sweating. "The Traveler? Saki... she isn't...?"

"She's safe in Japan," Aether promised. "Now help me find the others!"

They ran to Haruka. She was sinking into a pool of black mud, her eyes glazed over.

"Haruka!" Tsukasa yelled. "Grab my hand!"

"I'll just drag you down," Haruka whispered.

"Then I shall pull you up!" Tsukasa grabbed her hand. "You are the foundation of this troupe! Without you, the stage collapses! Stand up, Kiritani!"

Haruka looked at Tsukasa. She felt the solid grip of his hand.

'Foundation.'

She kicked her legs, breaking the surface of the mud. Aether helped pull her out.

"Mafuyu," Haruka gasped. "Where is Mafuyu?"

They found her standing in front of a rock wall. She was staring at it, her hand hovering over the stone as if reaching for a doorknob. She was trembling violently.

"Yes, Mother," Mafuyu whispered. "I will open it."

"Mafuyu!" Ichika (who Aether had saved from a vision of a silent classroom) ran forward. "Don't listen to her!"

"I have to be good," Mafuyu murmured.

"No!" Aether drew his sword. He didn't attack Mafuyu. He attacked the *illusion*.

He swung his sword at the rock wall, infusing it with Geo.

"Starfell Sword!"

CRASH.

The rock shattered. The "door" vanished.

The voice of the mother turned into a screech of distorted audio and faded away.

Mafuyu collapsed. Ichika caught her.

"It... it is gone?" Mafuyu shook.

"It wasn't real," Ichika hugged her tight. "She isn't here. You're in the Chasm. You're with us."

The Convergence

The mist cleared. They were back on the platform.

Yelan was panting, holding her bow. She had just fought off a phantom of her ancestors. Itto was punching the air. "Yeah! Take that, Blue Oni ghost! I ain't afraid of you!" Shinobu was calmly cleaning her blade. "Boss, you were fighting a rock."

"Everyone is back," Aether counted heads. "Is everyone okay?"

"We are... intact," Haruka said, wiping cold sweat from her brow. "But that place... it knows our weaknesses."

"It uses the past," Yelan confirmed. "We need to find the **Fantastic Compass**. It’s the key to stabilizing this space. If we don't, we'll be trapped in these nightmares forever."

"Compass?" Tsukasa stood up, his legs shaking but his voice returning. "Then let us find it! I refuse to let a bad dream dictate the finale!"

Suddenly, the shadows on the floor elongated. Black mud bubbled up, forming into deformed shapes of Abyss monsters.

"Not dreams," a voice hissed from the shadows. **"Regrets."**

"Enemies!" Yanfei warned.

"Let's go!" Itto roared, summoning his club. "Arataki 'The Ghost Buster' Itto is ready to rumble!"

"Formation!" Aether commanded.

As the troupe raised their weapons, Aether looked at them. They were shaken. They were terrified. But they were standing.

'They're getting stronger,' Aether thought. *'Even against their own ghosts.'*

Chapter 85: Chapter 63: The Escape from the Chasm

Location: The Fantastic Compass - Final Platform

The domain was collapsing. The chaotic space—a blend of memories and nightmares—was unraveling into a void of pure darkness.

"We have the Compass!" **Yanfei** shouted, holding the mystical device. "But to reverse the space-time distortion and send us back to the surface... we need an immense amount of energy. More than any of us have!"

"I can do it," **Yelan** stepped forward, her bracelet glowing. "My family guarded this place. I can—"

"No," a cold voice interrupted.

Xiao walked to the center of the platform. His mask was gone, but his face was etched with grim determination. The black aura of his karma was bleeding off him, mixing with the chaos of the domain.

"I am the Yaksha," Xiao stated. **"My power resonates with this darkness. I can channel it. I can power the device."**

"But the strain will kill you!" Ichika gasped. "You're already hurt!"

"It matters not," Xiao said, looking away. "I am a weapon. If a weapon breaks to save the wielder... then it has served its purpose."

He looked at Aether.

"Take them. Go."

"We are not leaving you!" Tsukasa shouted, stepping forward. "This is a troupe! The cast bows together! No one stays behind the curtain!"

"Silence," Xiao commanded.

He slammed his hand onto the Compass.

"General Alatus... falling in!"

Anemo energy exploded from his body. The platform lurched violently, shooting upward into the void.

The Ascent

The sensation was nauseating. Space warped around them—colors inverting, sounds stretching.

Shadows lunged from the darkness—black, shapeless monsters trying to drag the platform back down.

"Defend the perimeter!" Haruka yelled.

Itto roared, swinging his club. **"Ushi! Get 'em!"** The bull construct smashed a shadow. **Shinobu** was a blur of Electro, weaving between the enemies.

Tsukasa and Ichika stood back-to-back.

"They're endless!" Ichika gritted her teeth, swinging **Whiteblind** to crush a shadow that looked like a wolf.

"We must hold until the intermission!" Tsukasa blasted a Geo shockwave, knocking three shadows off the edge.

But in the center, Xiao was fading.

The Anemo energy was tearing him apart. His skin was cracking, glowing with dangerous light. He was burning his own life force to fuel the escape.

'Not enough,' Xiao realized. *'I need more power.'*

He looked up at the circle of light far above—the exit to the real world.

He looked at the humans he was protecting. The loud boy. The quiet girl. The Traveler.

'I have to push them.'

Xiao gathered the last of his strength.

"GO!"

He unleashed a massive pulse of wind. It didn't push the platform; it launched it. The platform shot toward the exit.

But the recoil knocked Xiao backward.

He fell off the platform.

"XIAO!" Aether screamed, reaching out.

Xiao fell into the abyss. He didn't look scared. He looked peaceful. He closed his eyes, accepting the darkness he had fought for thousands of years.

'Is this... rest?'

Mafuyu watched him fall. She saw the acceptance in his face. The willingness to be erased.

‘He is throwing it away,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘Just like Teppei.’*

She reached out her hand, though she knew she couldn't reach him.

But someone else could.

From the exit above, a golden light pierced the darkness. It was warm. Stable. Eternal.

It wasn't wind. It was **Geo**.

A massive, spectral hand made of amber light materialized from the ether. It bypassed the platform. It reached down into the abyss.

It caught Xiao.

Xiao’s eyes snapped open. He felt the warmth. He knew that energy.

"Rex... Lapis?"

The hand pulled him up. It tossed him gently through the air, depositing him onto the rising platform just as it breached the surface.

Location: The Chasm - Surface

They crashed onto the grass. Sunlight—real, warm sunlight—blinded them.

The platform dissolved.

"We... we made it?" **Itto** groaned, face-down in the dirt. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Boss, breathe," Shinobu sighed, patting his back.

Aether scrambled over to Xiao. The Yaksha was lying on the grass, breathing heavily, but alive.

"You idiot," Aether whispered, collapsing next to him.

"I..." Xiao looked at his hands. He looked at the sky. "I was... saved."

Tsukasa walked over. He looked down at Xiao. He didn't shout. He didn't pose.

"That was a terrible ending," Tsukasa said softly.

Xiao looked at him. "What?"

"Sacrificing yourself," Tsukasa said, his voice shaking. "It is a cheap plot device. It leaves the audience in tears, but it does not resolve the conflict. It just... leaves a hole."

He extended a hand to the Yaksha.

"Do not try to write yourself out of the script, Adeptus. We still need you for the sequel."

Xiao stared at the hand. Then, slowly, he took it. Tsukasa pulled him up.

"Hmph," Xiao looked away, but he didn't let go immediately. "You are noisy."

"I am a Star!" Tsukasa declared, wiping his eyes.

Mafuyu stood at the edge of the cliff, looking back at the entrance to the Chasm. She thought about the golden hand that had saved him.

'Zhongli,' she realized. *'He was watching.'*

She looked at Xiao, surrounded by the noisy, chaotic group. He looked annoyed, but he wasn't alone.

"He was saved," Mafuyu whispered to Haruka.

"Yeah," Haruka smiled, leaning on her spear. "Sometimes... the hero gets saved too."

The Farewell

Later that evening, the group began to disperse.

Itto and Shinobu headed back to Inazuma (after Itto demanded a rematch with Yelan, which she declined). Yanfei and Yelan returned to Liyue Harbor to file reports.

"We have to go too," Aether said, checking his map. "We still haven't found a way home for you guys."

"But we found Akito," Ichika said, her voice firm. "We know he's alive. We know he's in the Abyss."

"And we know he remembers us," Haruka added. "Even if it's just for a second. We can't give up on him."

"Then we keep looking," Tsukasa adjusted his scarf. "The Teyvat Expedition Team does not rest until the cast is complete!"

As they prepared to leave, Xiao appeared on a rock above them.

"Travelers," Xiao called out.

They looked up.

"The wind... is calm today," Xiao said awkwardly, looking away. **"If you ever call my name... I will listen."**

He vanished.

"I think that was his way of saying 'Thank you'," Paimon giggled.

"He is a tsundere," Tsukasa nodded wisely. "A classic archetype."

Aether looked west, past the jagged peaks of the Chasm.

"We're done with Liyue. We're done with Inazuma. There's only one place left to go for answers."

He pointed toward the horizon, where the rocky terrain gave way to lush, green rainforests.

"**Sumeru**," Aether said. "The Nation of Wisdom. The God there... **Lesser Lord Kusanali**... she governs the Irminsul. The memories of the world."

"The memories of the world?" Haruka repeated. She looked at Mafuyu, thinking of the red glitches and the strange dreams they had at the Kamisato Estate.

"If she knows everything that has ever happened in Teyvat," Haruka realized, "then maybe she knows *who* brought us here. And how to send us back."

"Then we go to the jungle!" Tsukasa pointed his sword dramatically. "To Sumeru! To knowledge! And hopefully... to less terrifying caves!"

"Let's go," Ichika smiled, hoisting her claymore.

As they walked toward the setting sun, leaving the darkness of the Chasm behind, Mafuyu lingered for a split second. She touched the mask at her hip.

'Wisdom,' Mafuyu thought. *'I wonder if Wisdom can explain why I feel so... heavy.'*

Chapter 86: Chapter 64: The Golden Apple and the Witch’s Letter

Location: Mondstadt - The City Gates

The troupe stood at the bridge of Mondstadt, intending only to restock supplies before the long trek to Sumeru. They were battered, covered in Chasm dust, and mentally exhausted.

"Finally," Tsukasa sighed, leaning against the gate. "A city with no stairs, no elevators, and no underground mud. Civilization!"

"Don't get too comfortable," Haruka adjusted her pack. "We grab rations, repair our weapons, and leave for Sumeru by noon."

"Big Sister Purple! Big Brother Loud!"

A small red blur shot out of the city gates. **Klee** sprinted across the bridge, followed closely by a panicked **Jean** and **Barbara**.

"Klee?" Mafuyu blinked as the child tackled her leg.

"You're back!" Klee cheered. "And just in time! We got a letter! A letter from the Dodo-King!"

"Dodo-King?" Aether asked.

Jean stopped, catching her breath. She looked stressed.

"It’s... complicated," Jean sighed. "Klee received a letter threatening to take away her Dodoco unless she comes to the **Golden Apple Archipelago**. It’s a group of islands that... shouldn't exist on any map."

"It’s a trap," Ichika said instantly, gripping her claymore.

"Likely," Jean nodded. "But the letter was addressed to Klee. And..."

Jean pulled the parchment from Klee’s backpack. Her eyes narrowed.

"...there is a postscript. Addressed to 'The Variables'."

She handed the letter to Aether.

To the Traveler, and the four little birds who fell from the Digital Sky,

You’ve been busy! Breaking seals, fighting dragons, scratching Harbingers. My, my. You certainly know how to make a scene.

If you want to know why you're here... or why the sky opened up to let you in... come to the islands. I've prepared a summer stage just for you!

Don't be late! The tea gets cold, and the ocean gets angry!

— Alice.

"Alice?" Haruka asked.

"Klee's mother," Albedo (who had quietly walked up behind them) explained. "And an elder of the Hexenzirkel. She... travels. Between worlds."

"Between worlds?" Tsukasa perked up. "Then she might know a way back!"

"Or she might blow us up," Paimon noted.

"We have to go," Mafuyu said, looking at the letter. "She knows."

The Journey

They couldn't sail there; the islands were surrounded by a fog barrier. They needed a dragon.

"Venti!" Paimon shouted at the statue in the plaza. "Wake up! We need a ride!"

Venti appeared (suspiciously fast) from the tavern. After a brief explanation (and a bribe of vintage wine), he summoned **Dvalin**.

The flight was majestic. For once, they weren't fighting the dragon; they were riding him.

"This is the proper way to travel!" Tsukasa cheered from Dvalin's back, his coat flapping in the wind. "No mud! No stairs! Just aerial supremacy!"

They descended through a thick bank of fog. The mist cleared to reveal a tropical paradise—sandy beaches, strange rock formations, and the wreckage of ancient ships.

The Golden Apple Archipelago.

Dvalin dropped them off on the central island and took off.

"Welcome to the Dodo-King's Empire!" Klee cheered, running onto the sand.

"It's... a beach episode?" Ichika blinked, looking at the sunny sky. "After everything in the Chasm... this feels weird."

"It feels *staged*," Haruka corrected, analyzing the placement of the torches and the strange mechanisms scattered around. "Someone built this place recently."

Location: Golden Apple Archipelago - Central Isle

They explored the central campsite. Sitting on a crate, conspicuously placed, was an ancient-looking gramophone.

"Is that... music?" Mafuyu walked over.

She touched the needle.

Crackle. Hiss.

A woman's voice—cheerful, mischievous, and echoing with power—played from the horn.

"Hello, Klee! And hello, my little guests from the Digital Sky!"

Alice's Voice.

"I hope you like the islands! I raised them from the ocean floor just for you. Consider it a vacation! You look terrible, by the way. The Chasm does wonders for the complexion, doesn't it?"

"She's watching us," Aether whispered, looking nervously at the sky.

"Now, I know you have questions," Alice's recording continued. *"Why are you here? Who took you? Is there a refund policy on Isekai trips?"*

She laughed.

*"I can't send you back. Only the **Administrator** can do that. But I can tell you this..."*

"Administrator?" Mafuyu interrupted the recording, though she knew it couldn't hear her. "What do you mean by that?"

As if anticipating the question, the recording paused for a beat, then hummed with amusement.

"Oh? You look confused. I'm talking about the one sitting on the throne twice above your emotional worlds. You know the ones..."

Alice's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

*"The Classroom built on memories. The Stage bathed in light. The Theme Park of wonders. And... the **Empty Sekai** of gray ash."*

The troupe froze.

Tsukasa looked at Ichika. Haruka looked at Mafuyu.

"Sekai?" Ichika breathed out. "How does she know...?"

"Wait," Haruka stepped back, looking at the others. "You guys... you have them too? Worlds inside your phones?"

"You mean the Wonderland?" Tsukasa gasped. "You have your own stages?"

"The Empty Sekai," Mafuyu whispered. "She knows about it."

The secret they had all been keeping—the existence of their private worlds—shattered in an instant. They weren't just travelers from the same country; they were users of the same system.

"Surprise!" Alice's voice chirped. *"Now that the ice is broken, let's get to the heavy stuff."*

The tone of the recording shifted. It dropped the playful motherly vibe and became something ancient.

"The Gods were desperate."

The air on the beach grew heavy.

"The Heavenly Principles... she broke the rules because she ran out of options. She stole you because your songs carry a code that can rewrite Fate."

"Why?" Ichika asked the machine. "Why us?"

"Ah-ah-ah!" Alice tutted. *"No spoilers! I could tell you the whole history of the loops and the fires... but where's the fun in that? Besides, if I tell you the ending now, you might stop walking. And you need to walk the path to understand the price."*

"You have to find that answer yourselves. But I will give you a warning."

The recording crackled with static.

"Troupes, Your friends back home... in Japan? They haven't given up on you. I can hear them. They are trying to build a bridge. They are trying to scream across the universe to find you."

Ichika's eyes widened. "Saki? They're... looking for us?"

"They are planning something big," Alice warned. *"But be careful. The Administrator... she isn't just a manager. She is a* ***Defense System****."*

"She was built by a ***Creator*** *who has been missing from the cosmos since eternity began. Her only purpose is to stop external threats. To stop contamination."*

Alice's voice grew sad.

"If your friends try to break in... she will view it as an attack. She will fight back. And I cannot intervene. Because to her... a witch who walks between worlds is just another virus to be purged."

Click.

The recording ended.

Silence hung over the sunny beach. The sound of the waves felt distant, muffled by the weight of the revelation.

"Our friends are fighting for us," Tsukasa whispered, clutching his chest. "Rui... Emu... Nene... they are trying to reach us."

"But if they do," Haruka said grimly, looking at the sky. "This 'Administrator' might hurt them. If she views them as a virus..."

"We have to be ready," Ichika said, her voice firm. "If the bridge opens... we have to be on the other side to catch them."

"But first," Klee popped up from behind a crate, holding a lizard. "Can we go fish blasting now? The Dodo-King might be hiding underwater!"

The heavy atmosphere broke slightly. Jean sighed, rubbing her temples, the stress of parenting the Spark Knight returning.

"Let's... set up camp," Jean said. "We have a lot to process. And we need to eat."

As the group dispersed—Tsukasa and Yoimiya arguing about the best way to light a campfire, and Haruka helping Noelle carry supplies—**Mafuyu** lingered by the gramophone.

She traced the brass rim of the horn with her finger.

'The Creator is missing,' she thought. *'The Administrator is a system built to be alone.'*

She looked up at the empty blue sky. It looked perfect. Artificial. Just like a stage set.

A thousand questions swirled in the empty space of her chest.

'Why build a guardian just to leave it?' 'Does a wall know it is lonely?' 'And if she is watching us... is she jealous that we have each other?'

Mafuyu touched the white mask at her hip. She felt a strange, cold kinship with the invisible enemy above.

'I need to know,' Mafuyu decided. *'I need to ask her why she is still standing.'*

"Mafuyu-san!" Ichika called out from the beach. "We're making skewers!"

Mafuyu lowered her hand.

"I am coming," she said.

Chapter 87: Chapter 65: The Summer Fantasia

Location: Golden Apple Archipelago - Pudding Isle

The sun was blindingly bright, reflecting off the turquoise waves. The air smelled of grilled fish and sea salt.

"EXPLOSION!"

BOOM.

A massive geyser of water erupted near the shore. Fish rained down onto the sand.

"Ten out of ten!" Tsukasa Tenma held up a score placard (drawn on a piece of driftwood). "The height! The symmetry! The sheer audible impact! Klee, you are a pyrotechnic prodigy!"

"Yay!" Klee cheered, adjusting her swimsuit and hat. "Big Brother Tsukasa gets it! Jean always says explosions are bad, but they're art!"

"Art indeed!" Tsukasa agreed, striking a pose in his rolled-up trousers. "Now, let us try a synchronized blast! On the count of three!"

"Tsukasa-senpai, please don't encourage her," Ichika sighed from under a parasol, though she was smiling. She was tuning her guitar (which she had summoned from her inventory, grateful it hadn't been lost in the Chasm).

Nearby, **Haruka** and **Barbara** sat on a picnic blanket, sharing a bottle of sparkling berry juice.

"So," Barbara asked, her eyes wide with curiosity. "In your world... idols perform in massive domes? With thousands of people?"

"Sometimes," Haruka nodded. "We use lights, lasers, and costumes to create a spectacle. But... the core is the same. We sing to reach people."

"I wish I could see it," Barbara dreamed. "Here, I sing for the Church. To heal. But sometimes... I just want to sing because it's fun."

"Then do it," Haruka smiled. "The next time you perform... forget the healing. Forget the duty. Just sing for yourself. The audience will feel it."

Barbara beamed. "I will! Oh, maybe we can do a duet later?"

"I'd love that."

Further down the beach, **Mafuyu** sat on a rock, letting the waves lap at her feet. She wasn't swimming. She was staring at the horizon, holding the white mask in her lap.

Jean walked over, holding two skewers of grilled fish.

"You aren't joining them?" Jean asked gently, offering a skewer.

Mafuyu took it. "I am... conserving energy."

Jean sat down next to her. She looked at Klee and Tsukasa laughing in the distance.

"Alice said the Gods were desperate," Jean said quietly. "That they took you to save us."

"We are just variables," Mafuyu replied. "Glitches in the code."

"Maybe," Jean admitted. "But looking at you now... you don't look like code. You look like children who have been forced to grow up too fast."

She looked at Mafuyu.

"It’s okay to rest, Mafuyu. Even for a moment. The war will still be there tomorrow."

Mafuyu took a bite of the fish. It was salty. Warm.

"Okay," she whispered.

Location: Central Campfire (Night)

The sun set, painting the sky in violet and gold. The group gathered around a massive bonfire. Klee had fallen asleep in Jean’s lap.

The atmosphere shifted from playful to contemplative. The recording from Alice still hung heavy in the air.

"So," Aether poked the fire with a stick. "You guys all have them? Worlds inside your phones?"

"It appears so," Tsukasa said, his voice unusually soft. "I thought the **Wonderland Sekai** was unique. A stage created just for me and my troupe. A place where imagination becomes reality."

"Mine is a **Classroom**," Ichika said, hugging her knees. "It’s always sunset there. It’s where Miku helps us write songs. It feels... nostalgic."

"Mine is a **Stage**," Haruka added. "A perfect stadium. Miku is there too, but she wears an idol outfit. She helps us practice."

They all turned to Mafuyu.

Mafuyu stared into the fire. The flames reflected in her empty eyes.

"Mine is... **Empty**," Mafuyu said.

"Empty?" Paimon blinked.

"It is gray," Mafuyu described. "There is nothing there. Just dust and scaffolding. No sound. No color."

"And Miku?" Ichika asked.

"She is there," Mafuyu nodded. "But she has white hair. She doesn't smile. She doesn't sing. She just... sits with me."

"Different Mikus," Aether mused. "Reflections of your hearts."

"If the Sekais are built from our emotions," Haruka analyzed, "then the **Administrator**... Celestial Miku... she must be the original source code. The one who built the system."

"Alice said she was lonely," Tsukasa remembered. "That she was built to be a wall."

"A wall that separates worlds," Mafuyu murmured.

She thought of the Empty Sekai. It was a place to hide. A place to be alone.

'Did she build the Sekais to help us?' Mafuyu wondered. *'Or did she build them because she wanted to see what it felt like to have friends?'*

"Our friends in Japan," Ichika gripped her guitar. "Saki... Honami... Shiho. Alice said they're trying to reach us. That they're 'planning something big'."

"If they try to break in," Tsukasa clenched his fist. "The Administrator will attack them. We cannot let that happen."

"We have to find the truth," Aether said, standing up. "We have to find out *why* the Creator left. And why the Administrator is so afraid of the outside."

He pointed west, toward the dark silhouette of the rainforest across the ocean.

"**Sumeru**," Aether said. "The Land of Wisdom. The Akasha Terminal holds the knowledge of the world. If there's an answer... it's there."

"Then we go," Haruka stood up, brushing sand from her legs. "Vacation is over."

"We go to the jungle!" Tsukasa declared, pointing his sword at the stars. "We shall find this 'Wisdom'! We shall learn the truth! And we shall save our friends on both sides of the screen!"

"And maybe," Mafuyu stood up, clipping her mask to her belt. "Maybe we can ask the Administrator... why she is crying."

The Morning Departure

The next morning, Dvalin returned to pick them up.

"Thank you!" Klee waved, holding her Dodoco. "Come back and play soon!"

"We will!" Paimon waved back.

As they flew away from the Golden Apple Archipelago, the islands seemed to shimmer, fading back into the mist like a dream.

"Goodbye, summer," Ichika whispered.

They landed on the coast of Liyue, near the Chasm. From there, the path led straight into the humid, vibrant greenery of the **Avidya Forest**.

The air changed. It became thick with the scent of wet earth, exotic flowers, and ancient magic.

"Sumeru," Aether said.

Tsukasa adjusted his coat. "A new stage. A new genre! From War Drama to... Mystery Adventure!"

"Let's just hope the script is better this time," Haruka sighed.

As they crossed the border, Mafuyu felt a strange sensation. A buzzing in her head. Not the static of the Sekai... but something organic. Like a thousand voices whispering at once.

'The forest,' she realized. *'It remembers.'*

Chapter 88: Chapter 66: The Forest of Dreams

Location: The Chasm - Sumeru Border

The transition was abrupt. One moment, they were walking on the red, dead stone of the Chasm. The next, the air turned humid and thick with the scent of wet moss and sweet flowers.

Towering trees with massive, spiraling trunks blocked out the sun. Glowing blue mushrooms lined the path.

"Green," Ichika breathed out, shielding her eyes. "So much green."

"It's a rainforest!" Paimon cheered. "And look! There's a Statue of the Seven up on that cliff!"

Tsukasa froze. His eyes locked onto the distant statue towering high above the path.

"Aha!" Tsukasa declared, pointing his sword at the cliff. "A new region means a new element! And this time, I shall be the first to claim the power of the forest!"

He turned to the group, striking a runner's pose.

"Last one to the top is a rotten Sunsettia! The Star leads the way!"

"Wait, Senpai!" Ichika called out.

Too late. Tsukasa was already sprinting up the winding dirt path, kicking up dust. "I AM SPEED!"

Haruka sighed. "Does he ever run out of energy?"

Mafuyu wasn't watching Tsukasa. She was looking at something floating in the air near the cliffside. It was a small, four-leaf clover symbol, glowing with Dendro energy. It pulsed rhythmically.

'It looks... inviting,' Mafuyu thought.

She raised her hand. She didn't know why, but she felt a pull. Like a string connecting her heart to that point in space.

She reached out.

ZOOOM.

Suddenly, her feet left the ground.

"Mafuyu-chan?!" Ichika gasped.

Mafuyu turned into a streak of light. She was pulled through the air at breakneck speed, slamming toward the sigil.

"Whoa," Mafuyu's eyes widened.

She reached the sigil, hanging in mid-air. But as the momentum faded, gravity returned. She started to fall.

"Ah."

She looked down. It was a fifty-foot drop.

'I am falling again.'

But then, she saw another sigil higher up.

'Grab it.'

She reached out again.

ZOOOM.

She zipped upward, bypassing the winding path entirely. She chained the jumps—one, two, three—soaring past the trees like a bird.

Location: Statue of The Seven

Tsukasa crested the hill, panting heavily, sweat pouring down his face.

"I... *huff*... I have... arrived!" Tsukasa wheezed, leaning on his knees. "The Star... conquers... the mountain!"

"You are late," a quiet voice said.

Tsukasa looked up.

Mafuyu was standing at the base of the statue, looking completely unruffled. She was patting her skirt.

"EH?!" Tsukasa's jaw dropped. "How?! I ran at maximum velocity! Did you teleport?!"

"I flew," Mafuyu pointed to the floating clovers. "They are... convenient."

Aether and the others caught up (taking the path like normal people).

"Okay," Aether wiped his brow. "Let's resonate."

They touched the statue.

Thrum.

The heavy, stable Geo energy in their veins was replaced by something vibrant. Something that felt like *growth*.

Dendro.

Aether's hand glowed green. Vines wrapped around Ichika's greatsword.

"It feels... alive," Haruka noted, summoning a small leaf that spiraled around her spear. "It's not just moving; it's blooming."

Tsukasa slapped the statue. A vine erupted from the ground, tangling into a barrier. "Aha! I can now summon the scenery itself!"

"It tickles," Mafuyu whispered, looking at the green sparks dancing on her catalyst.

Location: Gandharva Ville Outskirts

Equipped with the power of nature, they ventured deeper into the forest.

The path led them past a small cave. Sitting near the entrance was a woman in scholar's robes. She was surrounded by incense, muttering to herself, staring blankly at a wall.

"A scholar?" Haruka whispered. "Should we ask for directions?"

"Wait," Aether held up a hand.

They listened.

"...the connection... the divine knowledge..." the scholar mumbled, her eyes rolling back. "The new God... the wisdom... I can see it..."

"She's... talking to herself," Ichika noted nervously.

"She looks busy," Tsukasa decided, inching away. "It is rude to interrupt a monologue! Let us... proceed quietly."

"Agreed," Haruka nodded. "She seems... unstable."

They tiptoed past the mumbling researcher (Haypasia), leaving her to her incense and hallucinations.

The Lost Travelers

An hour later, they were thoroughly lost.

The trees all looked the same. The humidity was making Tsukasa's hair frizz.

"We are walking in circles," Mafuyu stated, looking at a mushroom they had passed three times.

"We are not lost!" Tsukasa insisted, hacking at a vine with his sword. "We are exploring the scenic route! The stage is merely... larger than anticipated!"

"My head hurts," Ichika rubbed her temples. "Does anyone else smell that? It smells like... sweet smoke."

"I smell it too," Haruka swayed slightly. "I feel dizzy."

Paimon spun in circles. "The world is spinning... wheeee..."

"Hey!"

A sharp, authoritative voice cut through the haze.

"You there! Stop moving!"

They froze.

Emerging from the ferns was a young man with large, fluffy fox ears and a tail. He wore a Forest Watcher’s uniform and carried a bow. His expression was stern, bordering on angry.

Tighnari.

"Are you trying to get yourselves killed?" Tighnari scolded, marching up to them. "You're walking straight into a **Withering Zone** without protective gear. And you've been breathing hallucinogenic pollen for the last twenty minutes!"

He looked at Tsukasa, who was trying to pose but was leaning against a tree for support.

"You look like you're about to pass out," Tighnari observed, crossing his arms. "I am Tighnari, the Forest Watcher. If you want to live, follow me. Now."

Tsukasa blinked, his vision swimming.

"A... fox... boy?" Tsukasa slurred. "Another... mascot?"

"I am *not* a mascot," Tighnari’s ears flattened. "And if you say that again, I'll leave you for the Fungi."

Chapter 89: Chapter 67: The Withering and the Watcher

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Gandharva Ville - Guest Hut

"I saw... a giant mushroom," Tsukasa mumbled, staring at the wooden ceiling. "It was singing opera. It wanted my autograph."

"He's hallucinating," a dry voice noted. "He inhaled too much pollen."

Tsukasa sat up. His head was pounding. He was lying on a leaf bed in a hut built high into a massive tree.

Standing over him was **Tighnari**, mixing a bowl of green, foul-smelling liquid.

"Drink this," Tighnari ordered, handing him the bowl. "It tastes like bitter moss, but it will clear the toxins."

Tsukasa drank it. He gagged. "Ack! It tastes like... regret!"

"That means it's working," Tighnari's ears flicked. "You entered a Withering Zone unprotected. You're lucky you only got dizzy. Usually, people lose their minds."

"We are... durable," Haruka said from the doorway, looking relieved that Tsukasa was awake. "Is everyone else okay?"

"Ichika and Mafuyu are outside with the trainee," Tighnari said. "Rest up. I have a patrol to finish."

Location: Outside the Hut

Ichika and Mafuyu were sitting on a wooden platform, watching a girl with green hair struggle to organize a stack of patrol logs. She dropped a scroll, picked it up, and dropped another one.

Collei.

"Need help?" Ichika asked gently, walking over.

Collei flinched, hugging the scrolls to her chest. "O-Oh! No! I'm fine! Master Tighnari told me to sort these, and I... I'm just a little clumsy today!"

"It's okay," Ichika smiled, picking up a scroll. "We're clumsy too. We got lost in the woods five minutes after arriving."

Collei looked at them. She saw their strange clothes, the Vision-like glows on their accessories.

"You're the travelers," Collei whispered. "From Mondstadt?"

"We passed through Mondstadt," Aether said, joining them. "We spent a lot of time there."

"Did you..." Collei hesitated. She looked down at her boots. "Did you meet an Outrider? Her name is **Amber**."

The troupe exchanged smiles.

"Meet her?" Tsukasa (who had stumbled out of the hut, looking green but energetic) laughed. "She is our mentor! Our guide! The reason we own wind gliders!"

"She taught us how to fly," Haruka added warmly. "And how to make Sticky Honey Roast."

"And she saved us from a bomb," Mafuyu noted.

Collei's eyes lit up. The shyness evaporated, replaced by a desperate, beaming hope.

"You know her! Is she okay? Is she still the Gliding Champion? Does she still wear that red ribbon?"

"She is amazing," Ichika assured her. "She talks about you, too. She said she had a friend in Sumeru she was writing letters to."

"She talks about me?" Collei touched her chest, tears welling in her eyes. "I... I haven't been able to write back lately. My handwriting is... shaky."

She looked at her hands. They were trembling slightly—the symptoms of Eleazar, though the troupe didn't know the name yet.

"But hearing she's okay..." Collei smiled, a bright, genuine smile that transformed her face. "That makes me so happy."

"If you want," Haruka offered. "We can help you write a letter. We can deliver it next time we see her."

"Really?" Collei gasped. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

The Mission: The Withering

"Alright, break time is over."

Tighnari marched over, checking his bow. "I'm heading out to clear a **Withering Zone** near the river. Since you lot are awake—and responsible for causing me extra paperwork—you're coming with me."

"To fight?" Aether asked.

"To learn," Tighnari corrected. "If you're going to travel in Sumeru, you need to know how to survive the forest's cancer."

They followed him to a clearing. The lush green forest suddenly turned grey and dead. The plants were withered, the air was red and oppressive, and a massive red tumor pulsed in the center.

"That," Tighnari pointed to the **Tumor of the Withering**, "is the source. It corrupts the ley lines. Living things inside the zone grow weak, while monsters grow strong."

"It feels... angry," Mafuyu whispered, clutching her chest. The Dendro energy inside her felt sluggish here.

"To clear it, we need **Dendrograna**," Tighnari pointed to a small plant with three floating green spirits. "Summon them, and use charged attacks to destroy the branches feeding the tumor."

"Like a puzzle!" Tsukasa realized. "Destroy the supports to bring down the set!"

"Exactly. Now, watch out!"

Three mutated fungi—glowing red and twice the size of normal ones—charged them.

Combat Start.

"I'll draw their fire!" Tighnari threw a **Vijnana-Phala Mine**, creating a field of confusion.

"Ichika! Shield!" Aether yelled.

Ichika slammed her claymore down. The Geo energy reacted with the Dendro environment. *Crystalize.* A green shield formed around her.

"Tsukasa! Haruka!"

"On it!" Haruka dashed forward with her spear. She didn't attack the monsters. She ran to the Dendrograna, summoning the spirits.

"Mafuyu! Catch!" Haruka shouted, tossing a spirit toward Mafuyu (a mechanic they improvised).

Mafuyu caught the Dendro energy with her catalyst. She looked at the red branches protecting the tumor.

She raised her hand.

"Wither."

She fired a bolt of concentrated Dendro energy.

BOOM.

The branch exploded.

"One down!" Tsukasa yelled, slashing a mushroom with his flute sword. "Two to go!"

They moved with practiced efficiency. Haruka cleared the second branch. Aether cleared the third.

The Tumor shrieked, exposing its core. A massive, mutated **Winged Shroomshroom** descended to defend it.

"Big guy!" Ichika yelled.

"Let me show you how a Forest Watcher does it," Tighnari narrowed his eyes. He drew his bow. Six arrows charged with Dendro energy materialized.

"Fashioner's Tanglevine Shaft!"

The arrows homed in on the monster, hitting its weak points instantly. The monster faltered.

"NOW!"

Aether and Tsukasa combined their attacks—Electro and Dendro. **Quicken. Spread.**

The reaction tore through the monster's defenses. It dissolved into dust.

Aether ran to the Tumor and purified it. The red mist vanished. The grass turned green again.

The Aftermath

"Not bad," Tighnari admitted, crossing his arms. "Your form is sloppy, but your elemental reactions are... intuitive."

"We learn fast," Haruka wiped sweat from her brow.

"You'll need to," Tighnari warned. "The Withering is spreading. The forest is sick."

He pointed toward the road leading north.

"If you're looking for answers... go to **Sumeru City**. Go to the **Akademiya**. But be warned: the Sages there value knowledge over life. And they possess the **Akasha Terminal**—a device that connects everyone's minds."

"A hive mind?" Tsukasa frowned. "That sounds... invasive."

"It is convenient," Tighnari shrugged. "But convenience has a price."

He handed Aether a letter.

"Give this to my master if you see him. But for now... just follow the river. And stay away from the red zones."

"Thank you, Tighnari," Ichika bowed.

"And say goodbye to Collei for us!" Paimon added.

As they walked away, Collei waved frantically from the treehouse, clutching a piece of paper —her new letter to Amber.

"We made her smile," Mafuyu noted.

"That," Tsukasa adjusted his coat, "is the greatest victory of the day."

They turned toward the river. Through the trees, they could see a massive, glowing white tree in the distance, crowned with a majestic city.

Sumeru City.

"The City of Wisdom," Aether said. "Let's go see what they know about the Sekai."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking in here, i am speedruning releasing the fanfic left and right for now, so you may see this fanfic stay at the top for a while lol

Chapter 90: Chapter 68: The City of Scholars

Location: Sumeru City - Gate of Knowledge

The road ended at the foot of a tree so massive it defied comprehension. The **Divine Tree** spiraled up into the clouds, its roots forming the foundation of a gleaming white city that wound around the trunk like ivy.

"It's... organic," Haruka noted, tilting her head back. "The architecture flows with the tree. It's beautiful."

"It's quiet," Ichika murmured. "For a capital city... no one is shouting. No one is singing."

"That is because wisdom requires focus," a dry voice interrupted.

A group of scholars in green and white robes stood at the main gate. They held clipboards and small, glowing leaf-shaped devices.

"Halt," the lead scholar, **Panah**, commanded. "Outlanders. By decree of the Grand Sage, all civilians entering Sumeru City must be registered and equipped with an **Akasha Terminal**."

"Equipped?" Aether frowned. "Tighnari said it was a tool. He didn't say it was mandatory."

"It is required," Panah stated, his tone brooking no argument. He held out the green earpieces. "The Akasha grants you access to the wisdom of the world. Without it, you are blind in this city. Furthermore... unregistered individuals are subject to immediate detention by the Matra."

"Detention?!" Tsukasa yelped. "We just got here! I refuse to go back to prison! Give me the earpiece!"

Tsukasa grabbed one and clipped it to his ear.

"It lights up!" Tsukasa marveled as the leaf glowed green. "Does it have a microphone? Can I project my voice to the entire city?"

"No," Panah sighed. "It projects knowledge *into* your mind. Try it. Focus on something."

Tsukasa closed his eyes. *'Who is the greatest star in Teyvat?'*

Beep. **[Query: "Greatest Star in Teyvat"] [Result: Nil. Did you mean "Alice"? Or "Barbara"?]**

"This machine is broken!" Tsukasa shouted. "It does not know me!"

"It accesses the repository of *useful* knowledge," Panah muttered, handing the rest to the group.

Mafuyu hesitated. She looked at the device. It looked like a shackle.

"Put it on," Haruka whispered. "We need to blend in."

Mafuyu clipped it on.

Hum.

Immediately, a stream of data flowed into her brain. *Map of the City. Local Laws. Currency Exchange Rates.* It wasn't a voice; it was pure information appearing in her mind as if she had always known it.

'It's invasive,' Mafuyu thought, touching the device. *'It fills the silence.'*

Location: Treasure Street

They walked into the city. People walked around with their terminals glowing, staring into space as they accessed information.

"It's like everyone is on their phones," Ichika noted nervously. "Walking without looking."

"Let's test it," Aether said. "Ask it about the **Sekai**."

They all focused.

Beep. **[Query: "Sekai" / "Digital World"] [Result: Insufficient Clearance. Data Blocked.]**

"Blocked?" Haruka frowned. "Not 'Unknown'. *Blocked*."

"That means the system knows what it is," Mafuyu realized. "But it won't tell us."

"We need higher clearance," Aether deduced. "We need to talk to the God of Wisdom. **Lesser Lord Kusanali**."

[Query: "Lesser Lord Kusanali"] [Result: The current Dendro Archon. Located in the Sanctuary of Surasthana. No further data.]

"Hey!" Paimon pointed. "Look at the people! Why do they look so... bored?"

Aether stopped a passerby. "Excuse me. Do you know where we can find the Archon?"

The scholar looked at him blankly. "Why would you want to find her? We have the Akasha. The Akasha provides all necessary wisdom. Faith is... obsolete."

He walked away.

"They don't care," Ichika whispered. "Their God is right there, but they care more about the machine."

"It is a city of logic," Mafuyu said. "Feelings are inefficient."

"I hate it here," Tsukasa declared. "A world without passion is a tragedy!"

Location: The Grand Bazaar

They wandered down a ramp, following the sound of music—faint, but present.

"Down there!" Ichika pointed. "I hear... dancing?"

They descended into the **Grand Bazaar**. Unlike the sterile upper city, this place was vibrant. Fabrics draped the walls, spices filled the air, and people were actually *talking* to each other.

"Help! Someone!"

A young woman in a fine dress stumbled out of a shop, looking dizzy. She swayed, nearly collapsing.

"Look out!" Haruka sprinted forward. She caught the woman just before she hit the ground.

"Are you okay?" Haruka asked, checking her pulse. "You're burning up."

"I... I'm fine," the woman wheezed. She had bandages on her arms—the scales of Eleazar. "I just... needed some air."

"Lady **Dunyarzad**!"

A tall woman with cat ears and a massive claymore strapped to her back pushed through the crowd. She looked fierce, her eyes scanning for threats.

Dehya. The Flame-Mane.

"Get away from her," Dehya growled, stepping between Haruka and the sick girl.

"We were helping!" Tsukasa protested, hands raised. "She swooned! A classic dramatic faint!"

"I'm okay, Dehya," Dunyarzad steadied herself on Dehya’s arm. "They caught me. They're... travelers?"

She looked at their clothes.

"You aren't from the Akademiya," Dunyarzad smiled weakly. "Thank goodness. I was afraid the Sages sent someone to drag me back."

"We are the Teyvat Expedition Team!" Tsukasa introduced. "We are searching for the Archon!"

Dunyarzad’s eyes lit up. "You want to meet Lesser Lord Kusanali?"

"Yes!" Paimon nodded. "Do you know her?"

"I love her!" Dunyarzad beamed. "She saved my life when I was a child. I'm actually trying to organize the **Sabzeruz Festival** for her birthday! But..."

Her smile faded.

"The Akademiya hates it. They say art, dance, and festivals are 'frivolous'. They want to shut us down."

"Shut down a festival?!" Tsukasa gasped. "That is villainy! Art is the soul of civilization!"

"They say 'Wisdom' is all that matters," Dehya spat, crossing her arms. "They treat anything that isn't data as trash. That's why the Bazaar is hidden down here. It's the only place people can actually breathe."

Haruka looked at Dunyarzad. She saw the passion in the sick girl's eyes—the desire to celebrate her idol, her god, despite her illness.

'She reminds me of Minori,' Haruka thought. *'Fighting for something she loves, even when the world tells her it's useless.'*

"We'll help," Haruka said suddenly.

"Eh?" Dehya blinked.

"You're organizing a festival, right?" Haruka smiled. "We know a thing or two about putting on a show. And we definitely know how to deal with people who hate fun."

"Really?" Dunyarzad clasped her hands. "You would help us? Even though the Sages might arrest you?"

"We are already on several wanted lists," Aether shrugged. "One more won't hurt."

"Then welcome to the team," Dehya grinned, slapping Aether on the back. "I'm Dehya. Her bodyguard. If anyone gives you trouble, tell me. I'll break their kneecaps."

"Violence is a last resort!" Tsukasa noted. "But appreciated!"

As they walked with Dunyarzad toward the stage area, Mafuyu touched her Akasha Terminal.

[Query: "Dreams"] [Result: The adults of Sumeru do not dream. Wisdom is rationality.]

"No dreams," Mafuyu whispered to herself.

She looked at the vibrant Bazaar, then at the sterile city above.

"A world without dreams," Mafuyu said. "It is just like the Empty Sekai. But they think it is paradise."

Chapter 91: Chapter 69: The Dance and the Loop

Location: The Grand Bazaar - Zubayr Theater

The sound of water splashing and applause drew them to the center of the Bazaar.

On a wooden stage decorated with flowers and carpets, a girl with red hair and horns (part of her costume) was dancing. She moved like a stream, her movements fluid and mesmerizing. She didn't dance for a camera or a distant crowd; she danced for the people right in front of her.

Nilou.

"She’s... radiant," Haruka whispered, watching with professional admiration. "She isn't performing *at* them. She's performing *with* them."

"A star of the people!" Tsukasa agreed, clapping loudly.

The dance ended. Nilou hopped off the stage, wiping sweat from her brow. She spotted Dunyarzad and Dehya.

"Dunyarzad!" Nilou beamed, running over. "You made it! And... you brought friends?"

"They’re the Teyvat Expedition Team!" Dunyarzad introduced. "They’re going to help us with the festival!"

"Really?" Nilou’s eyes sparkled. "That’s wonderful! We’re short on hands for the decorations. Do you guys know how to arrange flowers?"

"We are artists!" Tsukasa declared. "We can arrange anything! Flowers! Lights! The very fabric of the narrative!"

"He means yes," Ichika smiled.

They spent the afternoon working. Haruka helped organize the stage props (fixing the loose boards with her Geo resonance). Tsukasa directed the lighting (using Electro sparks to test angles). Mafuyu sat with Nilou, silently handing her ribbons.

"You're very quiet," Nilou noted gently.

"I am just... listening," Mafuyu said.

"That's okay," Nilou smiled. "Listening is part of the dance too."

By evening, the Bazaar was transformed. It looked magical.

"It’s perfect," Dunyarzad sighed happily. "Tomorrow... the Sabzeruz Festival finally begins. Lesser Lord Kusanali will be so happy."

"Let's get some rest," Dehya suggested. "Big day tomorrow."

They booked rooms at a nearby inn within the city.

"Goodnight, everyone!" Paimon cheered. "Tomorrow, we feast!"

"Goodnight," Ichika said, climbing into bed.

She closed her eyes.

BEEP.

Location: The Inn Time: The Next Morning

"Wakey wakey!" Paimon shouted, pulling the covers off Aether. "The sun is up! The birds are chirping! And Paimon is hungry!"

Ichika sat up, rubbing her eyes. "Morning..."

"We have to hurry!" Tsukasa yelled from the hallway. "The festival awaits! I must ensure the stage is prepped!"

They rushed to the Grand Bazaar. The festival was in full swing. Stalls were selling Yalda candies. Children were running around.

"It’s happening," Haruka smiled. "We did it."

They spent the day enjoying the festivities. They ate candies. They watched magic shows.

Then, the mood shifted.

Grand Sage Azar arrived. He stood at the top of the ramp, looking down at the theater with disgust.

"Stop this foolishness," the Sage commanded. "The arts are frivolous. Wisdom is absolute. Shut this down."

"But... it’s her birthday!" Nilou pleaded.

"The Archon does not need a birthday," the Sage scoffed. "Disperse. Or the Matra will make you."

The festival ended in tears. Dunyarzad collapsed, her illness flaring up from the stress.

"I’m sorry," Dunyarzad wept as Dehya carried her away. "I ruined it."

"No," Aether clenched his fist. "The Sages ruined it."

They returned to the inn, defeated and angry.

"We will fix this," Tsukasa vowed, pacing the room. "Tomorrow, we will protest! We will not let the curtain fall on a tragedy!"

"Tomorrow," Ichika agreed, feeling a heavy weight in her chest.

She went to sleep.

BEEP.

Location: The Inn Time: The Next Morning...?

"Wakey wakey!" Paimon shouted, pulling the covers off Aether. "The sun is up! The birds are chirping! And Paimon is hungry!"

Ichika sat up. She blinked.

"Huh?" Ichika frowned. "Paimon... didn't you say that yesterday?"

"Say what?" Paimon tilted her head. "I always say that! Paimon is a creature of habit!"

"We have to hurry!" Tsukasa yelled from the hallway. "The festival awaits! I must ensure the stage is prepped!"

Ichika froze. She looked at the door.

'That tone. That pitch. It's exactly the same.'

"Senpai?" Ichika walked out. "What about the Sages? Aren't we... protesting?"

Tsukasa looked at her, confused. "Protesting? Hoshino, did you have a nightmare? Today is the Sabzeruz Festival! It hasn't started yet!"

"But..." Ichika looked at Haruka. "Haruka-chan, don't you remember? The Sage came. He shut us down."

Haruka felt Haruka's forehead. "You're burning up, Ichika. Maybe the stress is getting to you? The festival is *today*."

"No," Ichika stepped back. "We... we did this already."

"Come on," Aether patted her shoulder. "You'll feel better after some Yalda candy."

They went to the Bazaar.

It was exactly the same. The stall placement. The smell of spices.

"Try this!" A vendor offered a candy box. "Pick a box! One has Sunsettia flavor, one has Lavender Melon!"

"I pick... Sunsettia!" Paimon pointed.

"Wait," Ichika grabbed Paimon’s hand. "It’s Lavender Melon. The Sunsettia one is on the left."

The vendor opened the box. It was Lavender Melon.

"Wow!" Paimon gasped. "Lucky guess, Ichika!"

Ichika felt a cold shiver run down her spine. It wasn't luck. She remembered the taste.

The day played out. The Sage arrived. He said the exact same words.

"The Archon does not need a birthday."

Dunyarzad cried. Dehya carried her away.

"I’m sorry," Dunyarzad wept. "I ruined it."

Ichika stood in the middle of the street while the others comforted her. The world felt... wrong. Like a song skipping on a scratched CD.

They went to sleep.

BEEP.

Location: The Inn Time: The Next Morning (Loop ???)

"Wakey wakey!" Paimon shouted. "The sun is up! The birds are chirping! And—"

"Paimon is hungry," Ichika finished the sentence in a deadpan whisper.

"Exactly!" Paimon beamed. "How did you know?"

Ichika threw her covers off. She grabbed her claymore.

"We have to hurry!" Tsukasa yelled from the hallway. "The festival awaits! I must ensure—"

Ichika kicked the door open.

"STOP!" Ichika screamed.

Tsukasa froze, one leg in his pants. "Hoshino?! What is the meaning of this outburst?!"

"We are doing it again!" Ichika grabbed Tsukasa’s shoulders. "Don't you see it? The dialogue! The timing! It’s a loop!"

"A loop?" Haruka rubbed her eyes. "Ichika, you're scaring us. Did you have a bad dream?"

"It’s not a dream!" Ichika turned to Aether. "Aether! The vendor! The Sunsettia candy is on the left! The Sage arrives at noon! Dunyarzad collapses at 4 PM! I can... I can *hear* it!"

She clutched her head.

"The background noise... the crowd... it’s the same track. It’s looping. We are trapped in a song that won't end!"

Aether looked at Ichika. He saw the genuine terror in her eyes. He thought about the strange feeling of déjà vu he had been having all morning.

"Okay," Aether said slowly. "Okay, Ichika. I believe you."

"You do?" Ichika nearly collapsed with relief.

"But," Mafuyu spoke up from the corner. She was holding her Akasha Terminal.

"My terminal," Mafuyu whispered. "It beeped."

"It always beeps," Tsukasa said.

"No," Mafuyu looked up. Her eyes were wide. "It beeped... *before* Paimon woke us up. Every time."

She looked at the glowing green leaf on her ear.

"It isn't an alarm," Mafuyu realized. "It’s a reset signal."

"We are trapped," Ichika whispered. "In the Sabzeruz Festival."

Chapter 92: Chapter 70: The Loop

Location: Sumeru City - Street Corner (Loop ???)

"We are trapped," Ichika whispered, clutching her head. The noises of the street—the candy vendors, the laughing children—sounded like a broken record scratching against her skull. "I know we are. The candy vendor. The Sage. It’s all the same."

Tsukasa looked concerned, checking her temperature with the back of his hand. "Hoshino, perhaps you are fatigued? A fever dream caused by the humidity?"

"She isn't wrong," Mafuyu said quietly, touching her ear piece. "The beep. It happens every morning. Just before we wake up."

As they argued, a familiar figure waved to them from the Adventurers' Guild booth.

Katheryne.

But she wasn't standing in her usual "Ad Astra" pose. She was waving eagerly, like a child seeing a friend across the playground.

"Travelers!" Katheryne called out. Her voice sounded... different. Younger. "Please, come here! I've been waiting for you to notice!"

Aether frowned, hand drifting to his sword. "Katheryne?"

They approached the booth. Katheryne leaned over the counter, her eyes glowing with a faint, Dendro-green light.

"Hello," she whispered. "I am not Katheryne. I am borrowing her bionic puppet for a moment. I am **Lesser Lord Kusanali**."

Paimon gasped. "The Archon?!"

"Shh," Nahida (in Katheryne's body) put a finger to her lips. "The Sages are watching through the Akasha. But they cannot see inside my mind."

She looked at the weary group with deep sadness.

"You have realized the anomaly. You are trapped in a **Samsara**—a loop of the Sabzeruz Festival. The Sages are harvesting your dreams."

"Harvesting dreams?" Haruka asked, horrified.

"To power their Great Project," Nahida nodded. "But your minds are growing tired. Your memories are being wiped with every reset. That is why you feel 'déjà vu'."

She raised her hand. A soft, green light gathered in her palm.

"I can restore your memories of the previous loops. I can give you the 'truth'."

She touched Aether's forehead. Then Paimon. Then Tsukasa, Haruka, and Mafuyu.

They gasped. Hundreds of days of memories flooded back. The festivals. The disappointments. The confusion. The exhaustion.

"We have been here..." Tsukasa staggered, holding his head. "For dozens of cycles? I have eaten the same curry fifty times?!"

"Hundreds," Nahida corrected gently.

Then, she turned to **Ichika**. She raised her hand to restore her memory... and stopped.

Nahida's eyes widened.

"You..." Nahida lowered her hand. "I do not need to touch you."

"What?" Ichika blinked.

"Your memory," Nahida looked at Ichika with fascination. "It is perfectly intact. The Akasha cannot wipe you. Every reset, every loop... your data remains solid. You remember everything on your own."

"I... do?" Ichika asked. "I just... I felt like the song was skipping."

"It is outstanding," Nahida mused. "It is as if your existence is written in a format the Akasha cannot overwrite. You are... 'Read-Only'."

"Read-Only?" Mafuyu looked at Ichika.

"Regardless," Nahida shook her head. "I am powerless to break the Samsara from the outside. The Sages have locked me away in the Sanctuary of Surasthana. You must find the 'Host' of the dream and wake them up."

"We have to solve the puzzle," Haruka realized.

"Or," Aether said, looking at the city gates. "We go get help. If we can't break it from the inside, maybe Tighnari or Alhaitham can help us from the outside. I'm going to leave the city."

"Leave?" Ichika felt a spike of panic. "Aether, wait. If this is a contained dream... what happens if you step outside the boundary? It might not be safe."

"I have to try," Aether said firmly. "I'll go to Gandharva Ville and bring back reinforcements. You guys stay here and look for clues. If I'm not back by sunset... well, the loop will just reset anyway, right?"

"But..." Ichika reached out.

"I'll be fine," Aether promised. "Trust me."

He looked at the city gates. He was the Traveler. He had faced dragons and gods. He couldn't rely on anyone else coming to save them this time. It was up to him.

Aether turned and sprinted toward the city gates.

Ichika watched him go. She watched him run past the guards. She watched him cross the bridge. She watched his silhouette fade into the distance of the forest.

And then... the world flickered.

BEEP.

Location: The Inn
Time: The Next Morning

"Wakey wakey! The sun is up! The birds are—"

"AETHER!"

Ichika screamed.

She didn't just wake up. She launched herself out of bed. She tackled Aether, grabbing him in a crushing hug, burying her face in his chest.

"Whoa!" Aether yelped, falling back onto his pillows. "Ichika?! What's wrong?"

"You're here," Ichika sobbed, clutching his shirt. Her whole body was shaking violently. "You're here. You didn't disappear."

"Of course I'm here," Aether patted her back, confused and blushing. "We just went to sleep. What happened?"

Paimon floated over, scratching her head. "Why is Ichika crying? Did she have a nightmare?"

Tsukasa sat up, rubbing his eyes. "What is the commotion? Has the venue caught fire? Why is Hoshino assaulting the Traveler?"

Ichika pulled back, looking at Aether's face. He looked... blank. Confused. Rested.

"You don't remember," Ichika whispered, horror dawning on her face. "You tried to leave."

"Leave?" Aether frowned. "Why would I leave? The festival is today. We need to help Nilou."

"No," Ichika stood up. Her eyes were hard. She grabbed Aether's hand. She grabbed Tsukasa's coat.

"We are going back to the Guild," Ichika ordered. "Right now."

Location: Adventurers' Guild

They dragged the confused group to Katheryne.

"We're back," Ichika said to the receptionist, her voice tight. "Fix them. Please. They forgot everything again."

Katheryne (Nahida) blinked. Then she smiled sadly.

"Ah. The Read-Only one has returned."

She raised her hand. The green light flashed.

Aether, Tsukasa, Haruka, and Mafuyu gasped as the memories of the previous loops—and the plan to leave—rushed back.

"I remember," Aether clutched his head. "I... I said I would go to Gandharva Ville. I ran to the bridge."

"You left," Ichika said, her voice trembling. "I watched you leave the city. And then... the beep happened. And we woke up."

"So, what happened?" Tsukasa asked Aether. "Did you find Tighnari? Did you bring help?"

Aether paused. He closed his eyes, trying to recall the journey.

He remembered walking to the gate. He remembered stepping onto the bridge. He remembered the feeling of the sun on his face. He remembered the smell of the forest.

And then...

"I..." Aether's eyes opened. They were wide with horror.

"I don't know."

"What?" Haruka asked.

"I remember stepping out," Aether whispered. "And then... nothing. No walking. No forest. Just... waking up in bed with Ichika yelling."

"It's like the file was corrupted," Mafuyu noted.

"Because you left the dream," Nahida explained sadly. "The Samsara only exists within Sumeru City. If you leave the city... you leave the consciousness of the dream. And since your mind is trapped here... stepping out is like stepping off the edge of the world."

She looked at Aether.

"You didn't go anywhere, Traveler. Your mind was simply... reset. Because there is nothing outside this city right now. Only the void."

Aether stared at his hands. He felt sick. He had walked into oblivion and didn't even know it.

Ichika gripped his arm tighter.

"Don't leave again," Ichika whispered. "Please. We have to solve it from inside. Together."

"I promise," Aether said, squeezing her hand. "No more leaving."

"Okay," Tsukasa slapped his cheeks, trying to shake off the existential dread. "So escape is impossible! The theater is locked! Then we must find the exit within the script!"

"The Host," Haruka remembered the clue from the memories Nahida just restored. "We need to find the person whose dream is powering this."

"Who would want a festival to never end?" Mafuyu asked.

They all looked at each other. The answer was obvious.

"**Nilou**," Ichika said.

Chapter 93: Chapter 71: End of Loop

Location: The Grand Bazaar - Zubayr Theater

The realization hung heavy in the air. **Nilou**—the gentle, smiling dancer—was the cage. Or rather, her dream was the cage.

They found her sitting on the edge of the stage, checking the flower decorations for the hundredth time.

"Nilou," Aether called out.

Nilou looked up, beaming. "Traveler! And everyone! Are you excited? The festival is about to start! I was just thinking... maybe we need more Padisarahs on the left?"

Haruka walked forward. She sat next to Nilou.

"Nilou-chan," Haruka said softly. "Do you remember when the Sage came?"

Nilou blinked. A shadow of confusion crossed her face. "The Sage? No... he hasn't come yet. The festival hasn't started."

"He did come," Ichika said, stepping closer. "Yesterday. And the day before. And a hundred days before that."

"What... what do you mean?" Nilou laughed nervously. "You're acting strange. Is this a skit?"

"It’s a dream," Mafuyu stated.

She pointed at the sky, which was a perfect, artificial blue.

"We are sleeping. And in this dream, the festival never ends. Because you don't want it to end."

Nilou stood up, backing away. "That's... that's silly. Why would I...?"

"Because the Sages want to destroy it," Tsukasa said, his voice unusually gentle. "And you wanted to save it. So your mind created a world where the curtain never falls."

"But," Tsukasa took off his hat, holding it to his chest. "A performance that never ends... has no meaning. A story must have a finale, Nilou. Or the audience is trapped."

Nilou looked at them. She looked at the stage. The memories began to crack through the denial—the Sage scolding her, Dunyarzad crying, the feeling of helplessness.

"I..." Nilou whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "I just wanted everyone to be happy. I just wanted to dance."

"Then dance," Haruka said firmly. "But not for a dream. Dance to wake us up."

The Intervention

Suddenly, the air shimmered.

"STOP."

A booming voice echoed from the entrance of the Bazaar. **Grand Sage Azar** strode in, followed by a squad of Matra guards. But they looked... wrong. Glitchy. Their faces were blurred.

"The dream's defense mechanism," Aether realized, drawing his sword. "The Akasha is trying to stop her from waking up."

"This festival is prohibited!" The Sage roared. "Arrest the dancer! Delete the anomaly!"

The guards charged.

"Defend the stage!" Aether shouted.

Combat Start.

"Formation!" Haruka yelled.

Ichika slammed her **Whiteblind** into the wooden ramp, creating a Geo wall that blocked the first wave of guards. "You won't touch her!"

Tsukasa leaped onto a crate. "Your authority has no power here! This is a theater of the mind! **Overload!**"

He snapped his fingers, unleashing Electro sparks that blew the glitching guards backward.

Mafuyu stood by Nilou. She opened her catalyst.

"They aren't real," Mafuyu told Nilou. "They are just doubts. Ignore them."

Nilou looked at the monsters charging the stage. She looked at her friends fighting to protect her.

She closed her eyes. She took a breath.

"I... I am the Queen of the Summer Festival," Nilou whispered.

She stepped into the center of the stage. She raised her arms.

The Dance of Sabzeruz.

She began to move.

It started slow. A ripple of water. A sway of grass.

As she danced, a pulse of Hydro energy washed over the Bazaar.

Ripple.

Where the water touched, the dream began to dissolve. The glitchy guards vanished into smoke. The walls of the Bazaar began to crack, revealing white light underneath.

"The stage is breaking!" Paimon yelled, holding onto Aether.

"Keep dancing!" Haruka shouted, using her spear to sweep away a lingering shadow. "Don't stop, Nilou!"

Nilou spun. Her movements grew faster, more confident. She wasn't dancing for the Sages. She wasn't dancing for the past. She was dancing for the future.

Ripple. Ripple.

The sky shattered like glass. The fake sun fell.

"It’s beautiful," Tsukasa gasped, watching the world end in a shower of petals and light.

Nilou finished her dance with a final, graceful pose.

"Happy Birthday... Lesser Lord Kusanali."

FLASH.

Location: The Inn
Time: The Next Morning (Reality)

"Wakey... wakey...?"

Paimon’s voice was groggy.

Ichika opened her eyes. Her head felt heavy, like she had slept for a year. She looked at the window.

A bird was chirping. But it wasn't the same chirp. It was off-key. It was *real*.

"We're back," Ichika whispered.

She sat up. She looked at her hands. She felt... tired. But clear.

Tsukasa fell out of his bunk with a loud *thud*.

"Ow..." Tsukasa groaned. "My head... it feels like I memorized a thousand scripts in one night."

"We broke the loop," Haruka breathed out, sitting on the edge of her bed.

They rushed to the window.

Down in the street, people were walking. But they looked confused. Some were rubbing their heads.

"The Samsara is over," Aether said, checking his Akasha Terminal. "The harvest has stopped."

"We need to find Dunyarzad," Ichika said suddenly, panic rising. "In the dream... she was getting worse every cycle. If her mind was trapped for that long..."

They ran.

Location: The Grand Bazaar

They found Dunyarzad resting on a bench, Dehya kneeling beside her.

"My lady?" Dehya asked gently.

Dunyarzad opened her eyes. She looked weak, but she smiled.

"I had... the most wonderful dream," Dunyarzad whispered. "I dreamed... that Nilou danced for me. A thousand times."

Nilou, who was standing nearby with tears in her eyes, rushed over and hugged her.

"It wasn't a dream," Nilou sobbed. "We saw it. You saw it."

Mafuyu stood back, watching the reunion.

She touched her Akasha Terminal.

[Query: "Samsara"] [Result: Data corrupted. Cycle terminated.]

"The show is over," Mafuyu murmured.

"But the villains are still in charge," Haruka noted, looking up toward the Akademiya, where the Sages sat in their tower. "They stole people's dreams. They used us like batteries."

Chapter 94: Chapter 72: The Port of Hidden Deals

Location: Sumeru City - Adventurers' Guild

The morning sun felt different today. It was linear. Yesterday was yesterday, and today was a new day.

"We broke the loop," Ichika exhaled, leaning against the Guild counter. She watched the people walking by—no longer trapped in a cycle, but living their lives. "But... we still don't know *why* they did it. Why trap the whole city?"

"To harvest dreams," **Katheryne** replied. But her voice wasn't robotic. It was gentle.

She blinked, her eyes glowing faintly green. **Nahida** was back in control.

"Traveler. Anomalies. You have saved the sanity of my people. For that, I thank you."

"We want to save you too!" Paimon whispered loudly. "We're going to bust into the Sanctuary and—"

"No," Nahida cut her off gently. "The Sages are arrogant, but they are not careless. If you approach the Sanctuary now without a plan, you will simply be detained. We need to understand *what* they are building with the harvested dreams."

She slid a commission paper across the counter.

"I have intercepted a request from the **Adventurers' Guild**. It is... unusual. It calls for the retrieval of a specific artifact that has surfaced in the black market of **Port Ormos**."

"An artifact?" Haruka picked up the paper.

"A **Divine Knowledge Capsule**," Nahida explained. "It contains data that does not belong to this world. The Sages are desperate to obtain it. If you can get to it first... we might learn their endgame."

"Forbidden Knowledge," Mafuyu repeated. "Like the Sekai?"

"Perhaps," Nahida said enigmatically. "Go to Port Ormos. It is far from the Akademiya's direct gaze. You will find answers there."

The green light faded from Katheryne’s eyes. She blinked, returning to her standard robotic demeanor. "Ad Astra Abyssosque! Please complete your commission safely!"

"To the port, then," Aether adjusted his sword. "We need to get to the bottom of this."

Location: The River to Port Ormos

They took a waverider boat down the river, leaving the oppressive, scholarly atmosphere of the capital behind. As they traveled south, the vegetation grew wilder, the air saltier.

Finally, the massive, bustling structure of **Port Ormos** came into view. Two giant trees formed the archway of the harbor, and the city was built into their roots and branches.

"Now *this* is lively!" Tsukasa cheered, leaping onto the dock. "It smells of commerce! Of sailors! Of illicit deals happening in back alleys! A perfect setting for a noir drama!"

"Please don't sound so excited about illicit deals," Ichika sighed.

"It feels... looser here," Haruka noted, scanning the crowd. "People aren't staring at their Akasha terminals. They're shouting, haggling. It’s more like Liyue."

"And more dangerous," Aether warned. "The **Eremites** run this place. Mercenaries."

"We are looking for the Knowledge Capsule," Mafuyu reminded them. "Where do we start?"

"The black market," Haruka said. "We need to find a broker."

Location: Port Ormos - Market District

They spent the afternoon asking around (carefully). The word on the street was that a high-value item was up for auction, and various student groups and mercenaries were fighting over it.

"Hey, you!"

A rugged Eremite blocked their path near a spice stall. "You asking about the Capsule? That's dangerous talk for tourists."

"We are not tourists!" Tsukasa drew his **Flute** sword (mostly for show). "We are high-profile collectors!"

"Collectors, eh?" The Eremite sneered. "Then maybe you have 500,000 Mora for the entry fee?"

"We..." Tsukasa patted his pockets. They were still recovering financially from Zhongli’s spending spree in Liyue. "We have... charm?"

"Get lost."

The Eremite shoved Tsukasa.

Suddenly, a hand caught the Eremite’s wrist.

"Violence is inefficient," a calm, monotone voice said. "It draws the Matra. And if the Matra arrive, the auction is canceled. Nobody gets paid."

The Eremite flinched, looking at the man who had intervened.

It was a tall man with grey hair, teal eyes, and a headset that looked far more advanced than a standard Akasha terminal. He wore the robes of the Akademiya, but his muscles suggested he spent more time in the gym than the library.

Alhaitham.

"You..." The Eremite pulled his arm back. "You're that crazy scholar. The one buying up all the junk."

"I am a Scribe," Alhaitham corrected, dusting off his sleeve. "I merely document transactions. Now, run along. You're blocking the road."

The Eremite grumbled, but he backed off. This scholar clearly had a reputation.

Alhaitham turned to the troupe. His gaze was analytical, cold, and entirely unimpressed.

"You're loud," Alhaitham said to Tsukasa.

"I am projecting!" Tsukasa defended.

"You're the Traveler," Alhaitham looked at Aether. "And the 'anomalies' from Inazuma. I read the reports."

"You work for the Akademiya?" Haruka stepped in front of the group, spear ready.

"Technically," Alhaitham shrugged. "But don't worry. I'm not here to arrest you. Too much paperwork."

He started to walk away, opening a book as he moved.

"Wait!" Ichika called out. "You... you know about the Capsule, don't you?"

Alhaitham stopped. He didn't turn around.

"Everyone in Port Ormos knows about the Capsule," he said dryly. "But knowing *about* it and knowing *where* it is are two different things."

He glanced back over his shoulder.

"If you're looking for it... you're looking in the wrong place. The Eremites don't have it yet. They're trying to broker a deal with a merchant named **Dori**."

"Dori?" Paimon asked.

"The Lord of Sangemah Bay," Alhaitham said. "If you want the Capsule, find her. But bring Mora. Lots of it."

"Why are you telling us this?" Mafuyu asked.

Alhaitham looked at her. For a split second, his cold gaze softened into curiosity.

"Because the Sages want that Capsule," Alhaitham said. "And I find their desperation... illogical. Perhaps I just want to see who gets there first."

He walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

"He's weird," Paimon stated. "And he has big muscles for a bookworm."

"He is hiding something," Mafuyu murmured. "He acts indifferent. But he intervened."

"He gave us a lead," Haruka said. "Dori. Let's find her."

"And hopefully," Tsukasa checked his wallet again. "She accepts payment in... artistic exposure?"

Chapter 95: Chapter 73: The Merchant of Sangemah Bay

Location: Port Ormos - The Back Alleys

Finding the merchant wasn't hard. Finding someone willing to talk was.

"The password?" a shady informant whispered from behind a crate.

"Uh..." Paimon checked her notes. "We want to buy... uh... Harra Fruit that aren't too spicy?"

"And packaged in Sunsettia boxes?" the informant replied.

"Yes!" Tsukasa declared loudly. "We require the finest, most illicit fruit boxes you possess!"

"Shh!" The informant hissed. "Follow me."

He led them through a maze of warehouses until they reached a secluded, opulent tent hidden beneath the roots of the massive port tree. Inside, sitting on a floating cushion and counting a stack of Mora, was a small girl in purple genie pants and sunglasses.

Dori.

"Oh my, oh my!" Dori grinned, her glasses glinting. "New customers! And you look like you have... absolutely no Mora!"

"We have reputation!" Tsukasa countered, puffing out his chest. "We are the Teyvat Expedition Team! We seek the Divine Knowledge Capsule!"

"The Divine Capsule?" Dori’s smile sharpened. "Ooh, that's a hot item. Very dangerous. Very illegal. And very, *very* expensive."

She held up five fingers.

"Five million Mora. Upfront. No IOUs."

"Five... million..." Haruka felt faint. "We don't even have five hundred."

"Then you can't have the capsule," Dori shrugged. "But... since you're cute, and since Alhaitham seems interested in you... I can sell you the *location* of the auction. For a discount price of 500,000."

"We still don't have that!" Paimon yelled.

"Wait," Ichika stepped forward. She unclasped the **Whiteblind** claymore from her back. It was forged from Liyue’s finest white iron, a gift from the Qixing. "This... is this worth anything?"

Dori’s eyes zoomed in on the weapon. "Liyue craftsmanship? Refined ore? Hmm... I can give you 300,000 for it. You're still short."

"I have this," Mafuyu pulled the **White Mask** from her belt—the one Tsukasa had bought her in **Liyue**, back when they were preparing for the journey across the sea. It was simple wood painted with purple flowers, but it had traveled through the Abyss of the Chasm and the storms of Inazuma. It carried a residue of elemental energy and memory.

Dori sniffed it. "Abyssal trace? And Liyue opera wood... A collector's item for sure. Fine. Deal."

"Mafuyu, no!" Tsukasa grabbed her hand. "That is your character development prop! You cannot sell it! I bought that for you to find your own face!"

"We need the information," Mafuyu said calmly, placing the mask on the counter. "It is just wood. The face... is already in here." She touched her chest.

Tsukasa stared at her. He wiped a tear. "Development... achieved."

Location: The Pier - The "Test"

Dori gave them the coordinates. The auction was happening at a secluded pier on the west side of the port.

But when they arrived, the auction hadn't started. Instead, a crowd of Eremites and radical scholars were gathered around a man sitting on a crate.

He was holding a glowing red capsule.

"Behold!" the scholar shouted, his eyes wide and bloodshot. "The wisdom of the ancients! The King Deshret's truth!"

He jammed the capsule into his Akasha Terminal.

"Don't!" Aether shouted, running forward.

Too late.

BZZZT.

The scholar stiffened. His eyes rolled back.

"I see it..." he whispered. "The sky... the false sky..."

Then, he screamed.

It wasn't a scream of pain. It was a scream of a mind breaking under the weight of something it couldn't comprehend.

"IT'S TOO LOUD! IT BURNS!"

He clawed at his ears, tearing the Akasha terminal off, ripping skin with it. He fell to the ground, convulsing, babbling in a language that sounded like static.

"Get back!" Haruka pulled Ichika away.

Mafuyu froze. She stared at the screaming man.

She felt it. A pulse of energy radiating from him. It wasn't Dendro. It wasn't Abyss.

It was **Corruption**.

"He's gone insane," Alhaitham appeared beside them, his face grim. "That is what 'Forbidden Knowledge' does. It isn't wisdom. It's mental pollution. Data that the human brain cannot parse."

"And the Sages want to pump *that* into the whole city?" Tsukasa horrified. "Into the Akasha?"

"If they do," Haruka realized, "they won't just harvest dreams. They'll shatter minds."

The Eremites were panicking. The auction was dissolving into chaos.

"The Capsule!" Aether pointed. "He dropped it!"

The red capsule rolled across the dock.

"Grab it!" Alhaitham ordered.

But before Aether could move, a wind picked up. A mercenary leader—a large man with a red bandana—snatched the capsule.

"This power..." the mercenary grinned crazily. "It’s mine!"

He ran toward the ship.

"After him!" Tsukasa drew his sword. "We cannot let that cursed prop leave the stage!"

Chapter 96: Chapter 74: The Eremite’s Madness

Location: Port Ormos - The Piers

"Stop him!" Tsukasa shouted, pointing **The Flute** sword forward like a conductor's baton. "He is exiting stage right!"

The Eremite leader, **Mizri**, sprinted across the wooden walkways of the port, knocking over crates of spices and terrified merchants. He clutched the glowing red Divine Knowledge Capsule in his hand like a lifeline.

"Out of my way!" Mizri roared, vaulting over a stack of fish barrels.

"He's fast!" Ichika panted, the weight of her **Whiteblind** claymore slowing her down on the uneven terrain.

"I’ve got him," Haruka said.

She gripped her **Starglitter** polearm. She didn't run; she flowed. Tapping into the Electro resonance she had mastered in Inazuma, she burst forward in a streak of violet light.

Zzap.

Haruka materialized on top of a cargo crane ahead of the mercenary. She spun her spear and dropped.

CLANG.

She landed directly in Mizri’s path, the tip of her spear burying itself in the wood inches from his toes.

"End of the line," Haruka stated coldly.

Mizri skidded to a halt. He looked back. Aether, Tsukasa, and Ichika had cut off his retreat. Alhaitham walked calmly behind them, checking his nails.

"You have nowhere to go," Aether warned, drawing his sword. "Hand over the capsule."

Mizri looked at them. He looked at the water. He looked at the capsule pulsing with red, ominous light.

"No," Mizri panted, his eyes wide with a manic desperation. "I paid for this! I killed for this! The wisdom of King Deshret... it belongs to the strongest!"

"Don't do it," Mafuyu warned, sensing the unstable energy spiking. "It isn't wisdom. It is noise."

Mizri didn't listen. He slammed the capsule into his ear piece.

"I CAN SEE EVERYTHING!"

BZZZZT.

A shockwave of red energy exploded from his body.

The Boss Fight: The Corrupted Mercenary

Mizri screamed. His muscles bulged, veins turning black. The red aura of the capsule enveloped him, forming a jagged, phantom armor of pure rage.

"THE SKY!" Mizri howled, swinging a massive scimitar infused with corrupt energy. **"IT'S A LIE! IT'S ALL FAKE!"**

"He's lost it!" Paimon shrieked.

"Containment protocol!" Haruka ordered.

Mizri charged at Haruka. He moved with unnatural speed, his blade tearing through the wooden planks.

Haruka deflected the strike with her spear, but the force knocked her back. "He's stronger than a Lawachurl!"

"I shall provide the wall!" **Ichika** stepped in.

She slammed the **Whiteblind** down. **"Solidify!"**

A Geo shield crystallized around her. Mizri's second strike hit the claymore with a deafening *GONG*. The shield cracked, but Ichika held her ground, her boots digging into the wood.

"Tsukasa! Now!" Ichika gritted her teeth under the pressure.

Tsukasa leaped from a crate. He channeled Geo energy into his sword.

"Starfall Strike!"

He plunged down, summoning a stone stele that smashed into Mizri's side. The impact staggered the mercenary.

"Aether! Finish it!"

Aether dashed through the opening. He switched to Dendro, summoning razor-sharp leaves.

"Verdant Blade!"

He slashed Mizri's armor. The Dendro energy reacted with the mercenary's corrupted aura, causing a reaction that stunned him.

Mizri fell to his knees, clutching his head.

"The voices..." Mizri wept, clawing at his face. "Too many voices... make them stop... make the voices stop..."

He wasn't fighting anymore. He was drowning in information.

Alhaitham watched from the sidelines. He adjusted his headset.

"Fascinating," Alhaitham murmured. "The brain cannot process the influx. It attempts to overwrite the consciousness to make space for the data."

"Help him!" Ichika yelled at the scribe. "Don't just watch!"

Alhaitham sighed. He walked forward.

Mizri looked up, eyes bleeding. "Help... me..."

Alhaitham reached out. With a precise, practiced movement, he ripped the Akasha terminal off Mizri's ear.

Snap.

The red aura vanished instantly.

Mizri collapsed, unconscious.

The Deal

Silence returned to the pier. The only sound was the waves lapping against the wood.

Alhaitham picked up the Divine Knowledge Capsule from the ground. It was dull now, its energy spent.

"He will survive," Alhaitham said, checking Mizri's pulse. "Though his mind will likely be... fragmented for some time."

"That thing is dangerous," Aether said, sheathing his sword. "Why do the Sages want it so badly?"

"Because they are desperate," Alhaitham pocketed the capsule. "They are trying to create a new God. And to create a God, they need divine wisdom."

"A new God?" Tsukasa gasped. "They intend to recast the role of the Archon?!"

"They intend to replace Lesser Lord Kusanali," Alhaitham corrected. "They view her as a failure. They want a God of Wisdom who matches their own arrogance."

He looked at the troupe.

"You fight well. You have elements, but no Visions. You are... unpredictable."

Alhaitham crossed his arms.

"The Akademiya relies on the Akasha to predict everything. But they cannot predict you. That makes you valuable."

"Valuable for what?" Haruka asked, suspicious.

"For an investigation," Alhaitham said. "I intend to find out exactly what the Sages are building. And I need someone to help me infiltrate the process without alerting the system."

He looked at Aether.

"Traveler. You want to meet the Archon. I want to uncover the truth. Our goals align."

"We're in," Aether said. "But no more secrets. If we work together, we work together."

"Fair enough," Alhaitham nodded. "Meet me in **Caravan Ribat** in two days. We will head to the desert. The answers we need are buried in the sands of King Deshret."

He turned to leave.

"Wait," Mafuyu called out.

Alhaitham stopped.

"The man," Mafuyu pointed to the unconscious Mizri. "He said the sky was a lie. What did he mean?"

Alhaitham looked at the sky. It was blue. Perfect.

"Madness," Alhaitham said simply. "Or perhaps... knowledge that the world isn't ready for."

He walked away.

"And now this capsule showed him the same thing," Aether whispered.

"The script is flawed," Tsukasa muttered, looking up. "If the sky is a backdrop... then who is the audience?"

Chapter 97: Chapter 75: The Village of the Exiles

Location: Caravan Ribat - The Wall of Samiel

The rainforest ended abruptly. In its place stood a colossal wall of stone, separating the green life of Sumeru from the golden death of the desert.

"The Wall of Samiel," **Alhaitham** explained, shielding his eyes from the glare. "It blocks the sandstorms. Beyond this point, the Akasha does not function reliably. We are entering the blind spot of the God of Wisdom."

"It’s hot," Tsukasa complained, fanning himself with his coat tails. "Extremely hot! This costume was designed for stage lighting, not the surface of the sun!"

"Drink water," Haruka advised, handing him a canteen. "We have a long walk."

They passed through the gates. The wind changed instantly—from humid and sweet to dry and abrasive. Sand swirled around their boots.

"The desert," Ichika whispered, looking at the endless dunes. "It feels lonely."

"It is a graveyard," Alhaitham stated, walking forward. "The ruins of King Deshret lie beneath the sand. And those who seek his wisdom... usually end up buried with him."

Location: The Canyon to Aaru Village

The trek was grueling. The wind whipped sand into their eyes, and the sun was relentless.

"I see it!" Paimon pointed. "A village! Hanging on the cliff!"

Aaru Village. A settlement built precariously on the edges of a massive canyon, connected by rope bridges and ancient ruins.

They approached the main bridge.

"Halt."

A woman stepped out to block their path. She carried a shield of gold and lapis, and her eyes were heterochromatic—one blue, one gold. She radiated the aura of a guardian who had stood her ground against monsters for a lifetime.

Candace. Guardian of Aaru Village.

"The Akademiya is not welcome here," Candace said, her voice calm but firm. She looked at Alhaitham’s robes. "Turn back, Scribe. We have no more scholars for you to exile."

"I am not here on official business," Alhaitham replied, raising his hands peacefully. "And I am not exiling anyone. I am bringing... guests."

Candace looked at the troupe. She saw the dust on their clothes, the weariness in their eyes, and the strange, foreign weapons.

"Travelers?" Candace softened slightly. "You look exhausted."

"We are," Ichika admitted, leaning on her claymore. "We just need a place to rest. And... water."

Candace lowered her shield. "Aaru Village never turns away those in need. Come. But behave. The wind carries whispers, and I hear everything."

Location: Aaru Village - The Plaza

They walked into the village. It was poor, but lively. Children played near the elevators.

But huddled in the corners, sitting on mats or wandering aimlessly, were people in tattered Akademiya robes.

"Who are they?" Tsukasa asked, watching a man mutter to a wall.

"The **Village Keepers**," Candace explained sadly. "Scholars who went mad from Forbidden Knowledge. The Akademiya exiles them here because they are 'failed experiments'. We protect them."

Mafuyu walked up to one of the scholars. He was rocking back and forth, scratching equations into the dirt with a stick.

"The sky..." the scholar mumbled, his eyes wide and unseeing. "The stars are wrong... the answer is in the geometry... why won't it fit? It's all fake..."

Mafuyu watched him.

'Fake?' Mafuyu thought, a frown creasing her brow. *'What did he mean by that?'*

"His mind is broken," Haruka said quietly, walking up beside her. "He saw something he couldn't understand."

Suddenly, a shadow fell over the plaza. The air crackled with purple static.

"You speak boldly for a Scribe of the Akademiya."

A figure landed silently behind Alhaitham. He wore a jackal-head hood, and he held a polearm that surged with Electro energy.

Cyno. The General Mahamatra.

"General," Alhaitham didn't turn around. "I was wondering when you would show up."

"Alhaitham," Cyno's voice was a low growl. "You are far from your books. And you are traveling with the Traveler and the 'Anomalies' wanted by the Sages."

Cyno pointed his spear at Alhaitham's throat.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't arrest you for treason right now."

"Because I'm investigating the Sages," Alhaitham said calmly. "And I believe you are too."

"Lies," Cyno hissed. "You are their Scribe. You handle their secrets."

Combat Start.

Cyno lunged. His spear was a blur of violet lightning, aiming straight for Alhaitham's chest.

Alhaitham moved instantly. He summoned a Dendro chisel-mirror, deflecting the spear with a shower of green sparks. He drew a scimitar, parrying Cyno's follow-up strike.

CLANG.

"Stop!" Aether shouted.

He dashed between them, blocking Cyno's third strike with his sword. The impact slid him back across the sand.

"Get out of the way, Traveler!" Cyno barked, his eyes glowing with the spirit of the jackal. "He is dangerous!"

"He's helping us!" Ichika yelled.

She ran forward, swinging her **Whiteblind**. She didn't attack Cyno; she slammed the blade into the ground between the two men.

"Crystalize!"

A Geo wall erupted, separating Alhaitham and Cyno.

"We are on the same side!" Ichika pleaded, standing behind her shield. "We all want to stop the Sages!"

"Do we?" Cyno vaulted over the Geo wall, descending on Alhaitham with a crash of lightning. "The Scribe deals in information. He has the Divine Knowledge Capsule. He is part of the problem!"

Alhaitham blocked the strike, sliding back. "I secured it to keep it *away* from them, you stubborn matra."

Cyno raised his clawed hand, gathering a massive ball of Electro energy. **"Judgement is upon you!"**

"ENOUGH!"

BOOM.

A shockwave of Hydro energy blasted everyone apart.

Candace stood in the center of the plaza. Her shield was raised, glowing with the power of the oasis. Her heterochromatic eyes were furious.

"I said," Candace glared at Cyno, then at Alhaitham. "No fighting in my village."

The menace in her voice was heavier than any Archon's pressure. Even Cyno lowered his spear.

"He has the Capsule," Cyno said, breathing hard.

"And he is a guest," Candace stated. "As are you, General. If you wish to kill each other, do it in the desert. But here? You will talk."

She pointed to the village chief's house.

"Inside. All of you. Now."

Cyno glared at Alhaitham. Alhaitham sheathed his sword, looking bored.

"Fine," Cyno spat.

As they filed into the house, Mafuyu looked back at the mad scholar one last time. He was still muttering about the fake sky, oblivious to the battle of gods and men happening mere feet away.

'The sky...' Mafuyu touched her mask. *'I need to know what he saw.'*

Chapter 98: Chapter 76: The King’s Despair

Location: Aaru Village - Chief’s House

The sandstorm outside howled against the stone walls, but inside, the tension was quiet and sharp.

Alhaitham sat at the table, reviewing the Divine Knowledge Capsule. Cyno stood in the corner, arms crossed, watching him like a hawk.

Mafuyu walked up to the table. She didn't look at the capsule. She looked at Alhaitham.

"The scholar outside," Mafuyu said, her voice low. "He said the sky is fake. He said the stars are wrong."

Alhaitham paused. He didn't look up immediately.

"Madmen say many things," Alhaitham replied evenly. "They see patterns where there are none."

"The mercenary in Port Ormos said it too," Mafuyu pressed. "Just before his mind broke. He screamed that the sky was a lie."

She leaned in, her purple eyes devoid of light but filled with intensity.

"Two broken minds. The same hallucination. That isn't a coincidence. What does it mean? Is this world... a stage?"

Tsukasa perked up at the word 'stage,' but he stayed silent, sensing the gravity of the moment.

Alhaitham finally looked up. His teal eyes were cold, calculating. He realized she wasn't going to drop it.

"It is an ancient theory," Alhaitham admitted softly. "Knowledge that predates the Akademiya. It suggests that Teyvat is inverted. That the stars are not light, but holes in a false firmament."

He closed the capsule case with a snap.

"But listen to me, Anomaly. That knowledge is not just forbidden; it is corrosive. The human mind relies on the ground being down and the sky being up. If you start pulling at that thread... the tapestry unravels. And you end up like the man outside."

Mafuyu stared at him.

‘A false firmament,’ she thought.

"I understand," Mafuyu whispered.

"Good," Cyno interrupted, stepping into the light. "Philosophy class is over. We have a lead. The mad scholars all came from one place before being exiled here. **Dar al-Shifa**. The abandoned hospital in the desert."

"Hospital?" Haruka frowned. "Why abandon a hospital?"

"Because people stopped getting better there," Candace said grimly. "And they started disappearing."

Location: Dar al-Shifa (Abandoned Hospital)

They braved the sandstorm to reach the ruins. The hospital was a hollowed-out shell of stone, half-buried in the dunes. The wind whistled through the broken windows, sounding like crying children.

"This place..." Ichika covered her nose. "It smells like old medicine and rust."

"It’s dark," Paimon whimpered. "Use the Lumenstone!"

Aether lit the way. The walls were covered in frantic scribbles.

‘It hurts.’ ‘The voices won't stop.’ ‘King Deshret is coming.’

"King... Deshret?" Tsukasa read the wall, tilting his head dramatically. "Who is this monarch? Is he a local ruler? A rival playwright?"

"He is a God," Candace said, her voice filled with a solemn respect. "The Scarlet King. The Lord of the Desert."

"Is he... coming back?" Tsukasa asked, looking at the scribbles.

"He is dead," Alhaitham stated bluntly. "He died thousands of years ago. But the radicals in the desert—the Eremites—believe he will resurrect to wipe out the Akademiya and the Dendro Archon. They cling to his ghost."

"And the Sages used that belief," Cyno growled. "To lure them in."

They reached the lower levels. It looked less like a hospital and more like a dungeon. Cages. Restraints.

"They weren't treating them," Cyno’s voice shook with suppressed rage. He ran a hand over a set of shackles. "They were experimenting on them."

"Look at this," Haruka called out from a desk. She held up a dusty medical log.

"**Subject:** Village Keeper 403. **Treatment:** Divine Knowledge Extraction. **Result:** Mental Collapse. **Output:** Residual Divine Energy harvested."

"Harvested?" Ichika felt sick. "They were sucking the knowledge out of them?"

"To feed something else," Aether realized.

The Revelation

They found the main office at the bottom of the complex. It was untouched by the sand.

On the desk lay a schematic. It was a blueprint. Not for a building. For a **God**.

It depicted a massive, mechanical construct. A robot with four arms, powered by a Gnosis in the chest, and fueled by tubes of Divine Knowledge.

And in the cockpit... was a silhouette.

"Scaramouche," Aether confirmed, his blood running cold.

"The Balladeer," Cyno hissed. "The Sages... they aren't trying to resurrect King Deshret. That's just a cover story."

Alhaitham picked up the blueprint.

"They are building a new God of Wisdom," Alhaitham deduced. "They think Lesser Lord Kusanali is too weak. So they are making their own. Using the body of a Fatui Harbinger and the mind of the collective consciousness."

"That's why they need the Divine Knowledge," Mafuyu realized. "To give the puppet a mind that can rival a god."

"And the dreams," Haruka added, horror dawning on her. "The Samsara. The Akasha harvesting dreams... they're using the city's processing power to train the AI of the new God."

"They are sacrificing the people to build a monster," Ichika gripped her **Whiteblind**. "We have to stop them."

"We will," Cyno turned around. His eyes were glowing with the spirit of the Jackal. The General Mahamatra was gone; the Executor remained. "I will tear the Sages from their ivory tower with my own hands."

"Not yet," Alhaitham stopped him. "If we attack now, Scaramouche will crush us. He has the Gnosis. We need a plan."

"We need allies," Aether said. "We have the Resistance in the desert. We need the people in the rainforest."

"And we need to find out where they are building it," Haruka said.

Alhaitham pointed to the bottom of the blueprint. A location stamp.

The Joururi Workshop. Located beneath the Akademiya.

"They are building it right under our feet," Tsukasa whispered. "The audacity!"

"Let's get back to the village," Candace urged. "The storm is getting worse. And... I hear something."

"Haaaaa..."

A moan echoed from the depths of the hospital.

"Ghosts?" Paimon shrieked.

"No," Mafuyu looked at the shadows. "Victims."

From the darkness, corrupted spirits rose—the remnants of the scholars who died here. They weren't evil. They were just in pain.

"Help... us..." the spirits wailed.

"Rest," Aether whispered.

He drew his sword.

Chapter 99: Chapter 77: The Desert's Oath

Location: Dar al-Shifa - Lower Levels

"Haaaaa..."

The moan wasn't just sound; it was a vibration of pure agony. Shadows peeled themselves off the damp walls—corrupted spirits of the scholars who had died screaming.

"G-G-Ghosts!" Tsukasa shrieked, jumping behind Ichika’s heavy armor. "This genre shift was not approved! I do not do horror!"

"They aren't attacking," Mafuyu stepped forward. Her eyes were fixed on the writhing shadows. She didn't feel fear. She felt... familiarity.

"They are lost," Mafuyu whispered. "They looked for answers and found only noise. Now they can't stop hearing it."

One spirit reached out a clawed hand toward Mafuyu. **"The sky... it burns..."**

"Don't touch her!" Aether drew his sword. The blade glowed with purifying Geo light.

He didn't slash. He thrust the blade into the ground.

"Rest."

A pulse of golden energy rippled through the room. It wasn't an attack; it was a funeral rite. The shadows convulsed, then dissolved into dust, their final groans fading into silence.

"We have the blueprint," Alhaitham said, tucking the scroll into his robe. His face was pale. Even he was unsettled. "We leave. Now."

"Run!" Haruka commanded.

They scrambled up the rotting stairs, bursting out of the hospital ruins and into the blinding sandstorm. They didn't stop running until the silhouette of the haunted building was swallowed by the dust.

"I never want to go back there," Ichika gasped, leaning on her claymore. "That place... felt like a nightmare."

"It was a graveyard of minds," Cyno growled. "And the Sages built it."

Location: The Mausoleum of King Deshret

They regrouped with **Candace** at the entrance to the massive **Mausoleum**.

But the path was blocked. Dozens of Eremites emerged from the dunes, surrounding them. Leading them was a large man with a blindfold and a massive scimitar.

Rahman.

"You tread on holy ground, Traitors," Rahman spat, pointing his blade at Alhaitham and Cyno. "You Akademiya dogs killed our King. And now you come to loot his tomb?"

"We are not looting," Candace stepped forward, shield raised. "Stand down, Rahman. We seek the truth."

"The truth is that the Sages are enemies of the desert!" Rahman roared. "And you bring them here? Along with these... Outlanders?"

He signaled his men. The Eremites raised their crossbows.

"Hand over the Scribe and the General," Rahman commanded. "And the foreigners. The rest of you may leave."

"We aren't handing anyone over!" Tsukasa yelled, drawing his sword.

"Then you die with them."

Rahman raised his blade to signal the attack.

CLANG.

A massive claymore spun through the air, slamming into the sand directly between Rahman and the group. The impact created a shockwave that forced the Eremites back.

"Who?!" Rahman shouted.

"Back off, Rahman."

A figure walked out from the sandstorm. She dusted off her hands, looking fierce and annoyed.

Dehya. The Flame-Mane.

"Dehya?" Rahman frowned. "What are you doing here? You work for the rich in the city now."

"I work for my friends," Dehya said, walking over to pull her claymore from the sand. She stood in front of Aether and the troupe. "And these kids... they saved my employer. They saved the Festival."

She looked at the troupe and winked.

"I heard whispers in the Eremite network. Word is, you guys have a bounty on your heads. Something about a 'Forbidden Capsule'. I figured you might need a bodyguard."

"Dehya-san!" Haruka breathed out in relief. "You have excellent timing."

"Consider it payment for the dance," Dehya grinned. She turned back to Rahman. "Listen to them, you old fool. They aren't here to loot. They're here to show you that the Sages have been playing you for idiots."

Rahman hesitated. He respected the Flame-Mane.

"Fine," Rahman lowered his blade. "But if this is a trick... the desert will claim your bones. All of you."

The Truth of the Sands

They descended into the heart of the Mausoleum. The architecture was alien—prisms of light, floating pyramids, and technology far advanced beyond the current era.

"This civilization..." Tsukasa marveled, his voice echoing in the vast hall. "It was futuristic! How did it fall?"

"Hubris," Alhaitham said.

They reached the central priest's chamber. A holographic projection flickered to life. It showed the final moments of King Deshret.

The sky turning purple. The people going mad. The earth rotting.

And then... a small, glowing figure appearing. The **Greater Lord Rukkhadevata**. She used her power not to fight, but to heal. She shrank, expending her life force to purge the Forbidden Knowledge and save the desert people.

The projection ended.

"He... he sacrificed himself," Rahman whispered, falling to his knees. "And the Dendro Archon... she didn't kill him. She saved us."

"The war was a lie," Dehya said softly, placing a hand on Rahman's shoulder. "We've been fighting for centuries over a lie."

Mafuyu stared at the fading image of the purple sky in the hologram.

'Forbidden Knowledge destroys the world,' she thought. *'It corrupts the code. Just like Akito.'*

"The Sages are trying to bring that power back," Haruka said to Rahman. "They are harvesting dreams and lives to fuel a machine god. If they succeed... what happened to this kingdom will happen to all of Sumeru."

Rahman slammed his fist into the floor.

"We were fools," Rahman growled. He stood up, turning to his men. "The radicals... we have been pawns."

He looked at Cyno.

"General Mahamatra. The Eremites of the desert pledge our blades to you. We will help you tear down the Sages."

"Good," Cyno nodded. "We will need every sword."

The Ambush

They exited the Mausoleum, blinking in the sunlight. The alliance was formed. Hope was rising.

"We have the Eremites, we have the evidence, and we have a plan!" Paimon cheered. "Now we just need to—"

THWIP.

An arrow buried itself in the sand inches from Paimon's head.

"Ambush!" Haruka yelled, spinning her spear.

Surrounding the entrance to the ruins wasn't a ragged band of rebels. It was a highly disciplined, elite mercenary unit. They wore the colors of the **Corps of Thirty**, but their eyes glowed with the red enhancement of unwieldy power.

Leading them was a man holding a heavy axe—a **Stone Enchanter**.

"Rahman," the Enchanter called out casually. "You seem to be consorting with the enemy."

"I am consorting with the truth!" Rahman shouted. "Stand down, **Jebrael**! The Sages are using us!"

"The Sages pay well," the Enchanter shrugged. "And they paid a premium for two things."

He pointed his axe at Alhaitham.

"One: The Divine Knowledge Capsule."

He pointed his other hand at the troupe.

"And Two: The heads of the 'Anomalies'."

More mercenaries emerged from the dunes—**Galehunters** summoning Anemo spirits, **Desert Clearwaters** dancing with hydro blades. There were dozens of them.

"We're outnumbered," Ichika noted, raising her **Whiteblind**. "And we're tired."

"Hand over the Capsule," the Enchanter demanded, stepping forward. The ground rumbled as he summoned a Geo crocodile spirit. "And the foreigners. Do that, and the rest of you can leave."

Alhaitham stepped forward. He held up the capsule case.

"You want this?" Alhaitham asked.

"Give it here, Scribe."

Alhaitham looked at the troupe. He looked at Cyno. He looked at the army of mercenaries circling them like vultures.

"Combat probability... unfavorable," Alhaitham muttered.

He tossed the case to **Aether**.

"Run," Alhaitham ordered. "Get the troupe out of here. Rahman, Dehya, and I will hold them."

"What?!" Tsukasa gasped. "Splitting the party at the climax?! That is a death flag!"

"It's a strategy!" Alhaitham drew his sword. "Go! If the Sages get the capsule, it's over!"

"I'm staying too!" Dehya cracked her knuckles, igniting her claymore. "I'm not leaving without a fight!"

"Get them!" The Enchanter roared.

Combat Start.

Chapter 100: Chapter 78: The False God’s Gaze

Location: The Edge of the Desert

The chase had ended. The elite mercenaries hired by the Sages had been routed, but the dust was still settling.

Alhaitham sheathed his sword. He looked back at the vast expanse of the desert.

"This is as far as I go," Alhaitham said calmly. "Rahman and Dehya need someone to coordinate the Eremites. If we march on Sumeru City, we need an army, not a mob."

"You're staying?" Paimon asked.

"Strategy requires preparation," Alhaitham nodded. "We will meet you in the city on **Jnagarbha Day**. Until then... stay alive."

"I have my own hunt," **Cyno** stepped away from the group, his eyes glowing with Electro energy beneath his hood. "The Sages have spies everywhere. I will dismantle their eyes and ears before the main event."

He looked at Aether.

"Go to **Pardis Dhyai**. Tighnari is there conducting research. He can help you interpret the Divine Knowledge Capsule without melting your brains."

"Understood," Aether said. "Good luck, General."

Cyno vanished into the trees. Alhaitham and the mercenaries turned back toward the sands.

The troupe was alone again.

"Back to the forest," Haruka sighed, wiping sand from her spear. "I never thought I'd miss the humidity."

Location: Pardis Dhyai

Pardis Dhyai was a sanctuary of botany—a lush garden complex filled with rare flowers and scholars studying the flora.

"It is peaceful here," Tsukasa noted, looking at a bed of Padisarahs. "A stark contrast to the violence of the desert. It feels... curative."

"Excuse me," Ichika approached a researcher watering plants. "We're looking for Forest Watcher Tighnari. Is he here?"

"Master Tighnari?" The researcher pointed toward the massive glass greenhouse in the center of the complex. "He is inside the **main dome**. He is tending to a patient—a scholar named Haypasia."

"Haypasia?" Paimon scratched her head. "Oh! Is that the weird lady we saw mumbling in the cave when we first got here? The one who ignored us?"

"Likely," Haruka nodded. "She seemed obsessed with 'connecting' to something."

"Let's go," Aether said. "If Tighnari is there, we're safe."

They walked up the stone path to the dome. The glass structure glittered in the sun.

They stepped inside.

CLICK.

The door behind them locked automatically.

"Huh?" Tsukasa turned around, rattling the handle. "It is jammed! Is this a scheduled lock-in?"

"Something is wrong," Mafuyu whispered. "The smell."

The air inside the dome wasn't fresh. It was thick, heavy, and sweet. Green smoke curled around the exotic plants, rising from a burner in the center of the room.

Spirit Borneol.

"Don't breathe it in!" Aether shouted, covering his nose. "It's a hallucinogen!"

But it was too late. The smoke filled the room instantly.

The world tilted. The glass ceiling of the dome dissolved into a swirling vortex of purple and black. The plants withered and turned into jagged crystal spikes.

They weren't in Pardis Dhyai anymore. They were in a mindscape.

"So, the little mice have found their way into the trap."

A voice echoed from everywhere and nowhere.

Lightning struck the center of the room. A figure materialized from the smoke.

He hovered in the air, legs crossed, looking down at them with eyes that held the weight of a storm.

The Balladeer. Scaramouche.

"You!" Ichika gasped, stepping back. The memory of the factory—the suffocating pressure—crashed back into her mind.

"We meet again," Scaramouche smirked. He looked at Aether and Ichika. "You look recovered. Did the fox treat your wounds? Or did you just run away to lick them?"

Then, his gaze shifted to the rest of the troupe.

"And these must be the rest of your 'Expedition Team'. The loud one. The idol. And the empty shell."

He pointed a finger at **Tsukasa**.

"You call yourself a Star? In this world, stars are lies."

He looked at **Haruka**.

"You seek stability? The ground you stand on is built on corpses."

Finally, Scaramouche turned his gaze to **Ichika**. He floated closer, his eyes scanning her as if reading a scrolling list of error codes.

"And you, Ichika Hoshino," Scaramouche said, his voice cold and analytical. "The Sages were quite frustrated with you during the Samsara."

Ichika froze. "The... Samsara?"

"They tried to harvest your dreams," Scaramouche explained, circling her. "They tried to wipe your memory. To overwrite your data with the festival loop. But you... you resisted."

He leaned in, fascinated.

"Your memory integrity is outstandingly unique. Even absorbed into the Akasha, you remained 'Read-Only'. You rejected the rewrite. You remembered the truth when even the Traveler forgot."

Ichika gripped her claymore. "Because I made a promise! I promised I wouldn't forget my friends!"

"Promise?" Scaramouche laughed. "No. It is simply a compatibility error. Your mind refuses to integrate with the wisdom of this world."

He raised his hand, electricity crackling at his fingertips.

"The Sages couldn't delete you. But I am not a Sage. If the system cannot format you automatically... I can simply format you **manually**."

Finally, he looked at **Mafuyu**.

Scaramouche floated closer, his eyes narrowing as he scanned her with the power of the Akasha.

"And you..." Scaramouche murmured, his voice dripping with distaste. "I remember your data from the Samsara. The Akasha tried to harvest your dreams... but it found nothing."

He leaned in, his face inches from hers.

"Thousands of cycles. Thousands of dreams harvested from the people of Sumeru. But you? You were static. A void in the system."

Mafuyu didn't flinch. She stared back at him with dull, purple eyes.

"You are empty," Scaramouche hissed. "Your consciousness is a hollowed-out husk. You have no heart, no ambition, no self. You are exactly like a puppet that was never given a soul."

The lightning around him flared violet.

"And yet... you cling to them. You play at being human with your little friends."

He recoiled, as if the very sight of her offended him physically.

"How... disgusting. To embrace your own worthlessness? I cast aside my humanity to become a God. But you... you wallow in the mud."

"I am not wallowing," Mafuyu said quietly. "I am just... here."

"Not for long," Scaramouche sneered.

He spread his arms. Behind him, a massive, ghostly image of a mechanical god flickered into existence—four arms, wielding elements, powered by the Gnosis.

"I am becoming a God."

The pressure in the room increased tenfold. Haruka fell to her knees. Ichika struggled to breathe.

"The Sages are building me a body," Scaramouche explained, his voice booming like thunder. "They want wisdom? I will give them wisdom. I will strip the foolishness from this world and replace it with **Order**."

"You aren't a god," Aether gritted out, fighting the pressure. "You're just a puppet holding a stolen heart!"

"And what is a heart?" Scaramouche sneered. "Is it flesh? Is it blood? No. It is **power**. And now... I have it all."

He descended, floating back to Mafuyu.

"You understand, don't you, little doll? To be created... and then discarded. To be empty. But unlike you... I decided to fill the void myself."

Mafuyu stared at him. She saw the Gnosis glowing in his chest (or the projection of it). She saw the immense, crushing loneliness hidden behind the lightning.

"You are still crying," Mafuyu said softly.

Scaramouche froze. His face twitched.

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

The lightning flared. He raised his hand to erase them from the dream.

CRASH.

The sound of shattering glass broke the illusion.

"Wake up!"

A Dendro arrow flew through the smoke, dispersing the purple mist.

The mindscape shattered. The purple sky turned back into glass. The mechanical god vanished.

Scaramouche’s projection flickered. He looked at the arrow, then at the entrance.

"The Forest Watcher," Scaramouche scoffed. "Always interfering."

He looked back at the troupe.

"Run while you can. Jnagarbha Day is approaching. And when I ascend... there will be no place left to hide."

He vanished into smoke.

The Awakening

The troupe gasped, collapsing onto the floor of the greenhouse. The air was clearing.

Tighnari stood at the door, his bow drawn, his ears flattened against his head in anger.

"Idiots!" Tighnari yelled, rushing over. "I leave you alone for five minutes, and you walk into a Spirit Borneol trap?!"

"Tighnari..." Aether coughed. "He was there. Scaramouche."

"He connected through Haypasia's consciousness," Tighnari realized, checking the scholar who was slumped unconscious in the corner. "He’s linking minds. The Akasha... he’s already in the system."

"He’s becoming a God," Haruka whispered, shivering. "He wasn't lying. The power I felt... it was overwhelming."

"He is broken," Mafuyu said, staring at the spot where Scaramouche had vanished. "He is trying to fix himself with power. But he is still broken."

"We have to stop him," Ichika stood up, using her claymore for support. "Before Jnagarbha Day."

"We will," Aether promised. "But we need a plan. And we need to get back to the city."

Tighnari handed them water.

"Drink. Then go. If he is this close to ascension... then time is running out."

Chapter 101: Chapter 79: The God in the Bionic Shell

Location: Pardis Dhyai - Greenhouse

"Drink," Tighnari ordered, handing Ichika a cup of herbal tea. "Your hands are shaking."

"I'm fine," Ichika lied, gripping the cup. Her hands *were* shaking. The memory of Scaramouche's cold, analytical eyes scanning her code was burned into her mind. *'I will format you manually.'*

"He knows," Mafuyu whispered, sitting on a crate. "He knows we don't belong here."

"He knows we're threats," Haruka corrected, checking the tip of her spear. "That makes us dangerous to him."

"Excuse me."

A mechanical, yet oddly soft voice came from the greenhouse entrance.

The group turned. Standing there, looking out of place among the ferns and scholars, was **Katheryne** of the Adventurers' Guild. She looked dusty, as if she had walked all the way from the city.

"Katheryne?" Paimon blinked. "What are you doing here? Did you bring a commission?"

Tighnari's ears twitched. He frowned, looking at the receptionist.

"That... is not possible," Tighnari muttered. "The receptionist is a Snezhnayan bionic puppet. She is programmed to stay at her booth. She does not take walks in the rainforest."

"A bionic puppet?" Tsukasa gasped. "Like a stage prop come to life?!"

Katheryne stepped forward. Her eyes glowed with that familiar Dendro green.

"I am not here for a commission," she said. "I am here because... I felt the disturbance."

She looked at Aether and the troupe.

"You met him. The Prodigal Son."

"Nahida!" Aether realized.

"Lesser Lord Kusanali?" Tighnari stared at the robot, then at Aether. "You're telling me the Archon is possessing the receptionist?"

"It is a long story," Nahida said sadly. "But we do not have much time. Scaramouche... he has engaged the **Hayana** sequence. He is beginning to merge with the Divine Knowledge."

"Forbidden Knowledge," Mafuyu corrected. "The stuff that drives people mad."

"Yes," Nahida nodded. "But Scaramouche... he was created to hold a Gnosis. His body can withstand the corruption longer than a human. But his mind..."

She looked at Ichika.

"He targeted you, didn't he? The 'Read-Only' one."

Ichika nodded.

"Because you are proof that the Akasha is not absolute," Nahida explained. "The Sages believe they can calculate everything. But you... and your friends... you operate on a logic they cannot parse. You are the variables that can crash their system."

"So we are bugs," Haruka sighed.

"You are hope," Nahida corrected.

Suddenly, Tighnari's ears swiveled toward the entrance of the garden.

"Quiet," Tighnari hissed. " footsteps. heavy ones. And... the smell of steel."

"Search the perimeter! Don't let them escape!"

"The Corps of Thirty," Tighnari identified the shouts. "Mercenaries hired by the Akademiya. They found us."

The Chase

"We have to move," Aether drew his sword.

"The back exit!" Tighnari pointed. "Through the nursery! I'll hold them off with a spore cloud!"

They sprinted through the lush rows of plants. Behind them, Tighnari threw a **Vijnana-Phala Mine**, creating a wall of green confusion gas that stalled the first wave of guards.

"There! By the fountain!"

A squad of elite mercenaries cut them off near the rear gate.

"Formation!" Haruka yelled.

Tsukasa slid forward, kicking a water barrel over. "Electro!"

He snapped his fingers. The water electrified, stunning the guards.

"Go! Go!"

They ran out of Pardis Dhyai, heading toward the road to Sumeru City. But the ambush wasn't over.

As they reached the bridge, a massive figure blocked their path. An Eremite **Galehunter**.

"The Sages want the puppet," the Galehunter said, summoning a spirit hawk. "And the anomalies."

"Nahida, get back!" Aether yelled.

"I can help," Nahida (Katheryne) stepped forward. She raised her hand to summon a Dendro barrier.

But a bionic body is not a god's body. It was slow. Clunky.

From the shadows of the trees, a hidden assassin threw a spear.

THWACK.

The sound of metal piercing metal and synthetic flesh was sickening.

The spear slammed into Katheryne’s chest, pinning her to the wooden railing of the bridge.

"NAHIDA!" Ichika screamed.

Sparks flew from the wound. Katheryne’s eyes flickered violently.

"I..." The robot’s voice distorted. "I... cannot... maintain..."

"No!" Aether ran to her, grabbing her shoulders. "Hang on!"

The mercenaries were closing in.

"Go..." Nahida’s voice whispered through the static. "My consciousness... is returning... to the Sanctuary..."

She looked at Aether. She looked at the troupe.

"The Sages... they will try to... delete me. You must... save... the..."

Zzzzt.

The green light in Katheryne’s eyes died. The head slumped forward. The body was just a broken doll.

"She's gone," Mafuyu whispered.

"They killed her," Tsukasa stared at the broken machine. "They attacked a defenseless vessel!"

"We can't stay!" Haruka grabbed Tsukasa’s arm. "More are coming!"

Aether looked at the "corpse" of Katheryne. Rage boiled in his chest again, but he forced it down. He couldn't lose control like in the factory. He had to finish the mission.

"We go to the city," Aether growled. "We meet Alhaitham. And we take the Sages down."

Chapter 102: Chapter 80: The Doctor and the Trance

Location: Outskirts of Pardis Dhyai

Aether looked at the "corpse" of the bionic puppet. Rage boiled in his chest, but he forced it down. He couldn't lose control like in the factory. He had to be precise.

"We go to the city," Aether growled, his voice low and controlled. "We meet Alhaitham. And we take the Sages down."

"Right," Haruka nodded, checking the perimeter. "We can't stay here. Move."

Location: Sumeru City - Entrance

They expected guards. They expected a blockade.

Instead, the gates were open.

The city was silent. Not the silence of sleep, but the silence of a machine that had stopped humming.

Hundreds of citizens stood in the streets. Merchants, students, children. They were all wearing their Akasha Terminals. Their Terminals were glowing a bright, solid green.

They weren't moving. They weren't speaking. They were staring blankly ahead, caught in a collective trance.

"This is..." Tsukasa waved his hand in front of a guard’s face. The guard didn't blink. "This is horrifying! It is an audience that does not react!"

"They are processing data," Mafuyu realized, looking at the glazed eyes of a child. "Their minds are being used. Like puppets on a string."

"How fascinating, isn't it?"

A smooth, clinical voice echoed from the top of the ramp.

The troupe looked up. Standing on the bridge, looking down at them like a scientist observing lab rats, was a man with a blue mask and a pristine coat.

The Doctor. Il Dottore.

"The Second Harbinger," Aether hissed, drawing his sword.

"To synchronize the consciousness of an entire city..." Dottore mused, ignoring the sword. "The Sages lack imagination, but their ambition is commendable. They are trying to force a god's birth by overclocking the human mind."

"Stop it!" Ichika shouted. "You're hurting them!"

"Pain is part of the process," Dottore shrugged. "But you... you are the variables that keep ruining the data."

He raised a hand. The sound of high-pitched psychic feedback squealed through the air.

The troupe clutched their ears. The sound wasn't physical; it was attacking their minds.

"Stop."

A civilian teenager—a boy who had been standing in the trance—suddenly stepped forward. His eyes weren't blank anymore. They glowed green.

Nahida.

"You go too far, Zandik," the boy said, his voice overlapping with the Archon's.

Dottore looked at the boy. He smiled. It was a shark's smile.

"Ah. The Lesser Lord. Reduced to hopping between bodies like a parasite?"

Dottore didn't hesitate. He flicked his finger. A blast of psychic force slammed into the teenager.

"No!" Aether lunged, catching the boy before he hit the wall. The boy was unconscious, the green light fading from his eyes.

"You attacked a civilian!" Haruka screamed, leveling her spear.

"He is fine. Just a headache," Dottore dismissed. "Now, leave. I have calculations to finish, and you are boring me."

He released a wave of blue energy. It wasn't an attack to kill; it was a wave of pure *force* meant to expel them.

"GO!" Aether ordered, realizing they were outmatched. "We have to regroup!"

They turned and ran, fleeing the silent, frozen city, while the Doctor watched them go with cold indifference.

Location: The Road to Gandharva Ville

They ran until their lungs burned. They reached the edge of the rainforest, far from the city's influence.

"He... he treated people like numbers," Tsukasa wheezed, leaning against a tree. "Like props to be discarded."

"That is the Fatui," Aether said grimly. "We need to get back to Tighnari. We need to replan from scratch."

They continued walking. But Ichika was lagging behind.

She felt... heavy. Her head was spinning. The static noise from the city hadn't left her ears.

'I hear... crying,' Ichika thought.

Her vision blurred. The green of the forest turned into a blinding white.

"Ichika?" Mafuyu turned around.

Ichika swayed. Her **Whiteblind** claymore slipped from her hand, hitting the dirt with a heavy thud.

She collapsed.

"Ichika!" Haruka caught her before she hit the ground.

Location: The Consciousness (Inside Ichika)

Ichika opened her eyes.

She wasn't in the forest. She was floating in a void of data and light.

And she wasn't alone.

Imprisoned in a glowing, spherical barrier of Dendro energy was a small girl. She looked like a fairy, curled into a ball, hugging her knees.

Nahida.

"Nahida-san?" Ichika called out.

Nahida looked up. She looked terrified.

"You..." Nahida whispered. "The Read-Only one. You are the only one I can reach now. The Sages... they have locked the Sanctuary. They are trying to extract my Gnosis."

The sphere flickered. Red lightning—Scaramouche's power—lashed against the barrier.

"I can't hold on," Nahida said, tears falling. "My consciousness is fading. But you have to tell them."

Nahida reached out, placing her hand against the barrier.

"Tell Aether... tell Alhaitham... **Jnagarbha Day**. That is the deadline. If they don't stop the extraction by then... I will be deleted. And the new God will be born."

The barrier began to crack.

"Hurry, Ichika. Please."

Location: The Forest Path

"Ichika! Wake up!"

Aether was shaking her shoulders. Paimon was crying.

Ichika gasped, her eyes snapping open. But for a second, her eyes weren't brown. They were glowing **green**.

She sat up. Her movement was rigid, unnatural.

When she spoke, it wasn't her voice. It was soft, wise, and desperate.

"Time is short," Ichika said. **"The Doctor has accelerated the process. Jnagarbha Day is the final cycle."**

"Nahida?" Aether asked, stunned.

"I am trapped," Nahida (via Ichika) continued. **"Use the knowledge. Trust the Scribe. Save the city."**

The green light faded. Ichika slumped forward, coughing violently.

"Ichika!" Haruka rubbed her back. "Are you back?"

Ichika looked up. She looked terrified.

"I saw her," Ichika whispered. "She's in a cage. A glowing ball. And Scaramouche is trying to break in."

She grabbed Aether’s hand.

"She said to hurry. We don't have days. We have hours."

Tsukasa stood up. He looked at the distant city, where the people stood frozen in their trance.

"Then we do not walk," Tsukasa declared. "We run. To the planners. To the rebellion. It is time for the final act."

Chapter 103: Chapter 81.1: The Jnagarbha Scheme

Location: The Grand Bazaar - Secret Meeting Room

The map of Sumeru City was spread out on a table littered with coffee cups and weapon polish. The air was thick with tension.

"The plan is insane," Haruka stated, looking at the diagram Alhaitham had drawn. "You want to walk into the lions' den, hand over the most powerful warriors we have, and *hope* the Sages don't just execute you on the spot?"

"It is not hope," **Alhaitham** corrected, adjusting his headset. "It is probability. The Sages are arrogant. They believe they have already won. To them, we are not threats; we are specimens."

"So we play the part," **Cyno** crossed his arms, leaning against the wall. "We give them what they want. A traitorous Scribe and captured fugitives."

Alhaitham pointed to the Akademiya blueprint.

"I will enter the Grand Sage's office with the Traveler and Ichika. I will claim I have captured them. While Azar is distracted gloating... I will upload the **Divine Knowledge Capsule** into the Akasha terminal."

"You're going to use the capsule?" Tsukasa gasped. "But we saw what it did to the mercenary! It drove him mad!"

"I need to create a distraction that even the Akasha cannot ignore," Alhaitham said calmly. "And I need to swap the knowledge packets so Nahida can re-enter the system. To do that... I have to connect to the forbidden data."

"It could break your mind," Mafuyu warned.

"I am a Scribe," Alhaitham shrugged. "I read quickly. I'll be fine."

He looked at Aether and Ichika.

"Once I create the chaos, Azar will send you to **Solitary Confinement**. That is exactly where you need to be. It is the closest point to the Sanctuary of Surasthana. From there... you must wake the Archon."

"We'll do it," Ichika nodded, gripping her **Whiteblind**. "I can hold the line if things go wrong."

"Tsukasa, Haruka, Mafuyu," Alhaitham turned to the rest of the troupe. "You are **Team Ground**. While we are in the tower, you must secure the city. Dehya and Rahman will handle the guards, but we need you to ensure the civilians don't panic when the system goes offline."

"Leave the audience to us!" Tsukasa declared, though his hands were shaking slightly. "We shall keep the stage stable!"

"Good," Alhaitham stood up. "Operation Jnagarbha Day begins now."

Location: The Akademiya - Office of the Grand Sage

The doors to the highest office in Sumeru slid open.

Alhaitham walked in, head held high. Behind him, floating in anti-gravity cuffs (a mechanism Alhaitham had rigged to look real), were **Aether** and **Paimon**. Beside them, **Ichika** walked with her hands bound, her greatsword confiscated by the guards flanking them.

Grand Sage Azar stood by the window, looking down at the city.

"Scribe Alhaitham," Azar turned, a smug smile on his face. "I see you have made the correct choice. Rationality prevails."

"I merely weighed the variables," Alhaitham said smoothly. "The Traveler's resistance is futile. The new God is inevitable. Why should I perish for a failed cause?"

He shoved Aether forward.

"Here is the 'hero' who thought he could save the world."

Azar chuckled. He walked over to Aether, looking down at him with disdain.

"You really thought you could stop progress? We are creating a God of Wisdom who possesses *true* knowledge. Unlike Kusanali, who knows nothing."

"You're building a monster," Ichika spat.

"We are building God," Azar corrected. He looked at Alhaitham. "And the Divine Knowledge Capsule? Do you have it?"

"Right here," Alhaitham reached into his pouch. He pulled out the glowing red capsule.

"Excellent," Azar extended his hand. "Hand it over. It is the final piece for the God's mind."

Alhaitham looked at the capsule. He looked at Azar.

"You know, Grand Sage," Alhaitham said, his voice dropping. "I have always wondered... what does a God see?"

"What?" Azar frowned.

Alhaitham didn't hand it over. With a swift, violent motion, he slammed the capsule into his own Akasha Terminal.

CLICK.

"loading_forbidden_knowledge..."

Alhaitham stiffened. His eyes rolled back, glowing red.

"GRAAAH!" Alhaitham screamed. It wasn't acting. The data flooded his brain—chaos, static, the screams of a thousand dead civilizations.

He drew his sword.

"The sky... is fake... the wisdom... is a lie!"

Alhaitham charged at Azar.

"Guards!" Azar shrieked, stumbling back.

"Now!" Aether yelled.

Ichika snapped the fake bindings on her wrists. She couldn't summon her sword (the guards had it), so she used her body. She tackled the nearest guard, slamming him into the wall with Geo-enhanced strength.

"Get Alhaitham!" Ichika shouted.

But Alhaitham wasn't stopping. He swung his sword at the Grand Sage.

CLANG.

Azar activated a barrier control. A wall of energy slammed Alhaitham backward. The Scribe hit the floor, convulsing, the red light in his terminal flashing rapidly.

"He's insane!" Azar yelled. "Take him away! And the prisoners! Throw them in Solitary Confinement! Let them rot in the dark!"

Guards swarmed the room.

Ichika tried to fight, but without her weapon, she was overwhelmed. A stun baton hit her side.

"Gah!" Ichika fell.

"Aether!" Paimon cried as they were grabbed.

"It’s okay," Aether whispered to Ichika as they were dragged away. "It’s part of the plan."

Before the doors closed, Ichika looked back. She saw Alhaitham lying on the floor, seemingly unconscious. But as the guards dragged him off, she saw his hand twitch.

He had swapped the knowledge packs on the Sage’s desk.

‘He did it,’ Ichika realized, darkness taking her as the elevator descended. *‘Now it’s our turn.’*

Location: Solitary Confinement

The cell was pitch black. No windows. No sound. Just the hum of the Akasha system in the walls.

Aether, Paimon, and Ichika were thrown onto the cold floor.

"Are you okay?" Aether asked immediately, checking Ichika.

"I'm fine," Ichika rubbed her arm. "Just a bruise. Did... did it work?"

Aether touched his ear. His Akasha Terminal was glowing.

"Alhaitham uploaded the virus," Aether whispered. "The system is rebooting. We have a window."

He looked at the wall.

"Nahida is right on the other side of this data stream. We have to go in."

"Go in?" Ichika asked.

"Into the consciousness," Aether said. "Just like the Samsara. I'm going to find her."

He sat down, crossing his legs.

"Guard my body, Ichika. Whatever happens... don't let anyone disturb me."

"I promise," Ichika said. She stood up, taking a defensive stance at the door, her fists glowing with Geo. "I won't let them pass."

Aether closed his eyes.

The green light swallowed him.

Chapter 104: Chapter 81.2: The Stage of Resistance

Location: The Grand Bazaar - Entrance

The air in the Bazaar was stifling. Thousands of citizens were going about their daily lives, but their eyes were glazed over, the green light of their Akasha Terminals pulsing in a synchronized, eerie rhythm.

Tsukasa Tenma stood on top of a stack of crates near the entrance, peering over the heads of the crowd.

"The audience is... unresponsive," Tsukasa whispered, adjusting his collar. "It is like performing to a room full of mannequins."

"They are waiting for input," **Mafuyu** said from the shadows beneath the ramp. She tapped her own ear—she wasn't wearing a terminal anymore. "The system is feeding them a loop of calmness. But if Alhaitham succeeds... that loop will break."

"And when it breaks," **Haruka** tightened her gloves, gripping her **Starglitter** spear. "They will wake up confused. Terrified. If we don't manage the panic, there will be a stampede."

Dehya walked up, cracking her knuckles. Behind her stood **Rahman** and a squad of loyal Eremites.

"My boys are ready," Dehya said. "We'll handle the guards. You kids handle the people. Just make sure nobody gets trampled."

Nilou stepped out from the theater curtains. She looked pale but determined.

"I'm ready," Nilou said. "If they panic... I'll dance. I'll give them something to look at besides their fear."

"That is the spirit!" Tsukasa gave her a thumbs up. "The show must go on, even if the venue is collapsing!"

The Crash

Suddenly, the green light on every Akasha Terminal in the Bazaar turned **Red**.

BEEEEEEP.

A high-pitched screech of audio feedback tore through the air.

The citizens grabbed their heads, screaming. The trance shattered.

"What's happening?!" "My head!" "Where am I?!"

Chaos erupted. People started running blindly, knocking over stalls. A child fell, crying out as the crowd surged forward.

"Now!" Haruka shouted.

"ATTENTION!"

Tsukasa leaped from the crates. He didn't just shout; he projected. He infused his voice with a burst of Anemo (via the resonance lingering in his gear) to amplify it like a loudspeaker.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! DO NOT BE ALARMED!"

The sheer volume stunned the front row into silence.

Tsukasa landed in the center of the path, striking a magnificent, ridiculous pose.

"This is merely a... SPECIAL EFFECT!" Tsukasa improvised wildly. "A grand intermission provided by the Akademiya! Please, remain calm and observe the stage!"

"Special effect?" A merchant blinked, stopping mid-run.

"Yes! Look!" Tsukasa pointed to the theater stage.

Nilou didn't miss her cue. The musicians (who had been briefed beforehand) struck up a lively tune. Nilou spun onto the stage, her Hydro vision creating beautiful, calming ripples of water that floated over the crowd.

"Watch the water!" Nilou called out, her voice sweet and steady. "Breathe with the rhythm!"

The crowd slowed. The panic turned into confusion, then curiosity.

The Attack

"They're breaking the conditioning!"

A squad of **Corps of Thirty** mercenaries—the ones loyal to the Sages—charged down the ramp.

"Silence them!" the Captain ordered. "Arrest the dancers!"

"Not on my watch!" **Dehya** roared.

She slammed her claymore into the ground, creating a field of fire that cut off the ramp. Rahman and his Eremites charged, clashing with the guards in a flurry of steel.

"Haruka!" Dehya yelled. "Left flank! Don't let them reach the civilians!"

"On it!" Haruka moved.

She saw three guards trying to bypass Dehya’s line to get to the crowd. Haruka dashed, her spear glowing with Electro speed.

Clang. Clang. Sweep.

She parried two spears and swept the legs of the third guard. She didn't kill them; she disarmed them with surgical precision.

"Please remain seated!" Haruka commanded the civilians behind her, her "Idol Leader" voice in full effect. "For your safety, stay behind the line!"

The civilians listened. To them, she looked like a professional security officer.

"Mafuyu!" Haruka signaled. "Sniper!"

High above on the scaffolding, **Mafuyu** watched the battle. She held her **Eye of Perception**.

She saw a guard aiming a crossbow at Tsukasa (who was busy juggling balls of Geo energy to entertain a crying child).

‘Target locked.’

Mafuyu flicked her wrist. A bolt of homing energy shot from her catalyst. It hit the crossbow, shattering it in the guard's hands.

The guard looked up, terrified. He saw a girl in a white mask staring down at him with dead, purple eyes.

"Leave," Mafuyu whispered. Her voice carried over the wind.

The guard ran.

The Shutdown

Suddenly, the red lights on the Terminals flickered... and went dark.

The screeching noise stopped.

"The system..." Mafuyu lowered her hand. "It’s offline. Alhaitham did it."

The guards looked at their dead communication devices. They looked at Dehya’s flaming sword. They looked at the angry crowd that was starting to realize they had been manipulated.

"Retreat!" The Captain ordered. "Fall back to the Akademiya!"

The guards fled.

A cheer went up from the Bazaar—not for the Sages, but for the dancers and the defenders.

Tsukasa collapsed onto a bench, panting. "I... I have run out of jokes. My improvisational capacity is at zero percent."

"You were amazing," Nilou handed him a cup of water. "You stopped the stampede."

"We held the line," Haruka said, wiping sweat from her forehead. She looked up toward the massive tree of the Akademiya. "But the real fight is happening up there."

"Ichika and Aether," Mafuyu said, joining them. "They are inside."

As they caught their breath, the ground beneath them trembled.

RUMBLE.

It wasn't an earthquake. It was something heavy shifting deep underground.

"What was that?" Haruka gripped her spear.

Mafuyu looked at the floor. She felt it. The resonance she had felt in the factory. The cold, mechanical heartbeat of a God.

"He is waking up," Mafuyu whispered.

"Scaramouche," Tsukasa realized, dread filling his voice.

"We have to go," Dehya said, sheathing her sword. "The guards are gone. The path to the **Sanctuary of Surasthana** is open. We need to regroup with the Traveler."

"Let's go," Haruka said.

Tsukasa stood up. He adjusted his coat.

"The intermission is over," Tsukasa declared grimly. "Time for the Boss Fight."

Chapter 105: Chapter 82: The God of Wisdom’s Freedom

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

The green barrier shimmered and shattered.

Aether stepped through the fragments of light. He found himself in a beautiful, silent cage of glass and vines. Floating in the center, looking small and fragile, was **Lesser Lord Kusanali**.

Nahida.

She opened her eyes. They weren't glowing with the power of the Akasha anymore. They were just eyes—tearful and relieved.

"You came," Nahida whispered, drifting down to the floor. "You actually came."

"We promised," Aether smiled, offering his hand.

Ichika rushed past him. She dropped to her knees, hugging the small Archon.

"You're safe," Ichika sobbed. "You were alone in the dark for so long."

Nahida blinked, surprised by the sudden warmth. She patted Ichika’s back awkwardly.

"I wasn't entirely alone," Nahida said softly. "I heard your song, Ichika. When you were 'Read-Only'... your memories kept me anchored."

She looked at Aether.

"The Akasha is offline. The Sages have lost control. But... Scaramouche has engaged the final sequence. He is no longer in the factory."

"Where is he?" Aether asked.

"Below," Nahida pointed to the floor. "In the **Joururi Workshop**. He is trying to ascend."

The Reunion

The doors to the Sanctuary burst open.

Tsukasa, **Haruka**, and **Mafuyu** ran in, followed by **Dehya**. They were covered in dust and sweat from the riot outside.

"Ichika! Traveler!" Tsukasa shouted. "The city is secured! The audience is safe! But the ground is shaking!"

"We felt it too," Haruka said, running over to check on Ichika. She looked at the small child standing between them.

"Is this..." Haruka asked.

"I am Nahida," the Archon bowed politely. "Thank you for protecting my people. And for waking them up."

She looked at the troupe. Her eyes lingered on **Mafuyu**.

"And you," Nahida stepped closer to Mafuyu. "The Empty One."

Mafuyu looked at the God of Wisdom.

"During the Samsara," Nahida said, her voice filled with curiosity and sadness. "I could not read your dreams. Because you do not dream. You are... silence in a world of noise."

"Is that bad?" Mafuyu asked.

"No," Nahida shook her head. "It means you are the only one who can hear the truth without being deafened by it."

RUMBLE.

The entire Sanctuary shook. Dust fell from the ceiling.

"He is impatient," Nahida's expression hardened. "We must go. If he completes the ascension, he will rewrite the laws of Teyvat. He will erase the old world... and all of you with it."

"Then let us face the final boss!" Tsukasa drew **The Flute**, the blade humming in the charged air. "The Teyvat Expedition Team does not fear a puppet!"

"Speak for yourself," Paimon whimpered. "Paimon is terrified!"

Location: The Joururi Workshop (Entrance)

They descended the lift into the deepest part of the Akademiya. The air grew hot, smelling of ozone and burning metal.

They stepped onto a massive, circular platform suspended in a void.

In the center of the arena sat a colossal machine. It was the size of a building, painted in purple, gold, and black. Tubes of elemental energy pumped into its back.

Inside the chest cavity, connected by wires and glowing with the light of the **Electro Gnosis**, was **Scaramouche**.

He wasn't the small boy they had met in the factory. He was clad in divine armor, four mechanical arms floating behind him.

He opened his eyes.

"You dare gaze upon me?"

His voice wasn't just loud; it was omnipresent. It vibrated in their bones.

"Worms," Scaramouche sneered, looking down at them from his mechanical throne. **"You crawl into the presence of a God?"**

"God?" Haruka scoffed, spinning her **Starglitter** spear. "You're just a battery in a fancy suit."

"Silence!"

Scaramouche raised a mechanical hand.

"I am the Shouki no Kami! The Prodigal! I have surpassed the fragile shell of humanity! I have surpassed the Usurper!"

He looked at **Mafuyu** and **Ichika**.

"Especially you. The Glitch and the Void. You are errors in my new world. I will delete you first."

"He really hates us," Ichika noted, gripping her **Whiteblind**.

"He hates himself," Mafuyu said calmly. She opened her **Eye of Perception**. "He is trying to fill the hole with noise. But it is still empty."

"Traveler," Nahida floated up, glowing with Dendro energy. "I will interface with the terminal. I can find his weakness. But I need time. You must distract him."

"Distract a giant robot god?" Tsukasa laughed nervously. "This is... the role of a lifetime!"

"Formation!" Aether shouted.

Battle Start.

Chapter 106: Chapter 83: The Ballad of the False God

Chapter Notes

Theres some Bohemian Rhapsody Reference on this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Location: The Joururi Workshop

"Bow before me!"

Scaramouche raised a massive mechanical hand. Five elements—Pyro, Hydro, Cryo, Electro, Anemo—swirled in his palm. He slammed it down.

BOOM.

The platform shook violently. Shockwaves of elemental energy rippled out in concentric circles.

"Jump!" Haruka shouted.

Haruka and Aether leaped over the wave of fire. Ichika slammed her **Whiteblind** into the ground, creating a Geo wedge that split the wave of ice, protecting Mafuyu behind her.

"He’s huge!" Ichika yelled, gritting her teeth against the cold. "How do we even hit him?!"

"We target the joints!" Haruka commanded, landing on a floating platform. "Disable the arms!"

Tsukasa ran along the edge of the arena, **The Flute** singing in the wind as he dodged a bolt of purple lightning.

"Is this the best you can do?" Tsukasa shouted, pointing his sword at the giant mech. "I have seen better special effects in a high school gymnasium!"

Scaramouche’s giant head turned toward him. **"Insolent worm."**

He unleashed a barrage of Electro lasers.

Tsukasa sprinted, sliding under the beams. He laughed, the adrenaline (and terror) taking over. He remembered a song from his world—a classic rock opera about a man facing judgment. It felt appropriate.

"**Thunderbolt and lightning!**" Tsukasa bellowed, leaping off a debris pile to slash at the mech’s finger. "**Very, very frightening me!**"

Scaramouche paused. **"Mockery?"**

"It is a classic!" Tsukasa landed, striking a pose. "But tell me, oh False God! **Beelzebub** has a devil put aside for me... but does she have one for you? Or did she just throw you away?"

The mention of **Beelzebub** (Raiden Ei's Archon name) hit a nerve.

"SILENCE!" Scaramouche roared. The mech's chest glowed bright purple. **"I am not her shadow! I am the new world!"**

He smashed the floor, shattering the platform Tsukasa was standing on.

"WAAAAH!" Tsukasa fell.

"Gotcha!" Paimon grabbed his collar, struggling to hold him up. "Stop singing and fight!"

Phase 2: The Nirvana Engine

"Traveler!" Nahida's voice echoed in their minds. "I have analyzed the data. To penetrate his shield, we need to overload his energy intake. Destroy the **Nirvana Engines** he summons!"

Scaramouche rose. The upper half of the mech detached, connecting to a massive lower body. He stood up, towering hundreds of feet into the air.

Shouki no Kami.

He raised a staff the size of a tower.

"Setsuna Shoumetsu." (Instant Annihilation).

He summoned four floating engines in the corners of the arena. They began to charge a massive sphere of void energy.

"He's charging a wipe mechanic!" Aether realized. "We have to break those engines!"

"Divide and conquer!" Haruka ordered.

- **Engine 1 (Pyro):** Aether dashed to it. **"Hydro!"** He used the element he resonated to douse it.
- **Engine 2 (Cryo):** Tsukasa slid in. **"Electro!"** He snapped his fingers, overloading the engine with sparks. *BOOM.*
- **Engine 3 (Hydro):** Ichika swung her claymore. She didn't have an element that reacted well, but she had brute force. She smashed the casing, exposing the core. "Mafuyu!"

Mafuyu stood before the final engine. It was **Electro**.

She didn't use an element. She opened her **Eye of Perception**. She felt the flow of energy inside the machine.

‘It’s just a loop,’ she thought. *‘Like the Samsara. Break the cycle.’*

She thrust her hand forward. **"Silence."**

She injected a burst of raw Anemo vacuum into the intake vent. The engine choked, sputtered, and exploded.

"All engines destroyed!" Haruka yelled.

The energy sphere hovering over Scaramouche destabilized.

"Now, Lesser Lord!" Ichika shouted.

Nahida floated up. A small, green rabbit-like construct (the Neo Akasha Terminal) flew above Scaramouche’s head.

"Knowledge... is power!" Nahida declared.

The terminal fired a beam of concentrated Dendro energy. It hit Scaramouche directly in the chest.

CRACK.

The giant mech groaned. Its shields shattered. It fell to its knees, crashing onto the platform.

"Impossible..." Scaramouche gasped, the machine powering down. **"I am... a God..."**

"Now!" Aether yelled. "Everyone! Finish it!"

They charged.

Haruka vaulted off Ichika’s shield, driving her spear into the mech’s shoulder joint. **Ichika** spun her Greatsword, slamming it into the knee with enough force to dent the divine armor. **Tsukasa** ran up the arm of the fallen mech. "This is the climax!" He drove his sword into the elbow wiring.

Aether leaped from the top, his sword glowing with all the elements he had mastered.

"Windblade!"

He struck the cockpit.

KA-BOOM.

The cockpit shattered. Scaramouche was thrown out, tumbling through the air.

The Fall

Scaramouche hit the ground. He rolled, coughing. The cables connecting him to the Gnosis snapped.

He lay there, broken. He looked up at the ceiling.

"Why..." Scaramouche whispered. "Why can I never... hold it?"

He reached out a trembling hand toward the **Electro Gnosis**, which was hovering just out of reach.

"It's mine..." tears streamed down his face. "It was... always mine..."

"No," Nahida walked forward.

She stepped between him and the Gnosis.

"It never belonged to you," Nahida said softly. "It is just a battery. It cannot fill the hole in your chest."

Scaramouche stared at her. He looked at the troupe standing behind her.

He looked at **Mafuyu**.

Mafuyu walked forward. She looked down at the fallen Harbinger. She saw the tears.

"You are right," Mafuyu said. "Is this the real life? Or is it just fantasy?"

Scaramouche flinched at the reference.

"You built a fantasy where you were important," Mafuyu whispered. "But you are still just a boy crying for his mother."

Scaramouche’s eyes widened. Rage, grief, and exhaustion warred in his face.

Then, he collapsed. Unconscious.

Nahida reached out. She took the Electro Gnosis.

"The dream is over," Nahida said.

The Aftermath

The factory went silent.

Tsukasa sat down on a piece of rubble, wiping soot from his face.

"That..." Tsukasa panted. "Was a very... frightening... performance."

"We won," Ichika breathed out, leaning on her sword.

"Is it over?" Haruka asked, looking at the unconscious Harbinger.

"For now," Aether said. He looked at Nahida. "What do we do with him?"

"I will handle him," Nahida said. "There are... things he needs to see. Memories he has hidden from himself."

She looked at the troupe.

"But you... you have saved Sumeru. The Akasha is free. My people are free."

She smiled, a radiant, gentle smile.

"Let's go back to the surface. I believe there is a victory feast waiting for you."

"Food!" Paimon cheered.

As they walked to the lift, Mafuyu looked back one last time at Scaramouche.

'Caught in a landslide,' she thought, finishing the lyric. *'No escape from reality.'*

She turned and followed her friends into the light.

Chapter End Notes

Theres some Bohemian Rhapsody Reference on this chapter

Chapter 107: Chapter 84: The Toast of Wisdom

Location: The Grand Bazaar

The Grand Bazaar was alive.

Not the looping, anxious liveliness of the Samsara, but genuine, chaotic joy. The Sages had fallen. The Akasha was offline. The people were free to dream again.

Nilou danced on the central stage, her movements lighter than ever. **Dehya** and **Rahman** were arm-wrestling on a crate (Rahman was losing badly). **Alhaitham** was sitting in the corner with a book and noise-canceling headphones, trying to ignore the party he helped create.

Tsukasa Tenma stood on a table, holding a goblet of fruit juice high.

"A TOAST!" Tsukasa bellowed, his voice amplified by a touch of Anemo. "To the cast! To the crew! To the curtain call of the greatest drama Sumeru has ever seen!"

"To the heroes!" the crowd roared back.

"He really enjoys the spotlight," **Tighnari** sighed, his ears twitching at the volume. "Though I suppose he earned it."

"Let him have it," **Collei** smiled, holding a plate of Pita Pockets. "He helped me write my letter to Amber. He's... a good big brother."

Cyno walked up to the table, looking deadly serious. He crossed his arms.

"Tsukasa," Cyno said. "I have a question."

"Ask away, General!" Tsukasa grinned.

"You fought a giant robot," Cyno said. "You could say... you really put a *wrench* in his plans."

Silence.

A tumbleweed blew through the Bazaar.

"Because..." Cyno explained, deadpan. "Robots have gears. And wrenches fix gears. But you broke them. It is a play on words."

Tsukasa stared at him. Then, he burst out laughing. "AHAHAHA! A pun! A classic comedic device! You are a man of culture, General!"

Haruka facepalmed. "They're bonding over bad jokes. We're doomed."

The Goddess Arrives

The crowd parted. A hush fell over the Bazaar.

Lesser Lord Kusanali walked in. She wasn't hiding. She wasn't possessing a puppet. She walked with her own two feet, looking small but radiant.

"Lady Kusanali!" Dunyarzad gasped, bowing low.

The entire Bazaar knelt.

"Please, rise," Nahida smiled gently. "Tonight, I am not your Archon. I am just a guest at a birthday party I missed for five hundred years."

She walked up to the troupe.

"Traveler. Ichika. Everyone. May I steal you for a moment?"

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

Back in the quiet of the Sanctuary, the mood shifted from celebratory to solemn.

Nahida floated in the center of the room, accessing the glowing green terminal that connected to **Irminsul**—the tree that recorded all memories of Teyvat.

"You asked about your home," Nahida said. "And the 'Administrator'."

"Can you find them?" Ichika asked hopefully. "Can you find the way back?"

"I have searched the Irminsul," Nahida said. Her expression was troubled. "The Tree records everything in this world. But when I search for 'Japan', or 'Tokyo', or 'SEKAI'..."

She projected a hologram. It showed the roots of the tree. But some roots were tangled, glowing with a jagged, foreign static.

"There is no data," Nahida whispered. "You are not from this world. That much is clear. But usually, 'Descenders'—people who come from outside—leave a trace. You... do not."

"We don't?" Mafuyu asked.

"It is... anomalous," Nahida analyzed the hologram. "You do not flow with the Ley Lines. You were *implanted* into them. Like new lines of code forcibly written into an existing program."

She waved her hand, bringing up a new image. It was a jagged, red tear in the sky—a pattern of cubes.

"I found a record of your entry," Nahida said, her voice dropping to a hush. "The energy signature that brought you here... it is identical to the power that silenced Khaenri'ah five

hundred years ago."

Aether stiffened. "The Heavenly Principles."

"Yes," Nahida looked at them with grave realization. "The Unknown God involved herself directly. She didn't just open a door; she grafted your existence onto Teyvat's fate. That is why the world accepts your elemental resonance so easily."

"So we were put here," Haruka frowned. "On purpose."

"And trapped," Nahida added. "There is a firewall blocking my view of your origin. A **Red Eye**."

Mafuyu stiffened. "The Administrator."

"This Administrator..." Nahida looked at Mafuyu. "She seems to be collaborating with the Heavenly Principles. They have locked the gate from the other side. Until the 'Script' they are watching plays out... you are trapped here."

"The script," Tsukasa clenched his fist. "So we are just... entertainment?"

"To them, perhaps," Nahida said. "But to us... you are heroes. And stories can be rewritten."

She looked at Aether.

"There is one more thing. The **Gnosis**."

"Scaramouche had it," Aether noted.

"I have retrieved it," Nahida confirmed. "But I... traded it."

"Traded it?" Paimon gasped. "To who?!"

"**The Doctor**," Nahida said grimly. "In exchange for knowledge. Knowledge about the 'False Sky'... and about **you**."

She looked at the troupe.

"The Fatui have been watching. They know you are not just travelers. They know you are variables in an equation they are trying to solve."

Mafuyu stepped forward. "The fake sky."

"Yes," Nahida nodded. "The Doctor confirmed it. The sky of Teyvat... is a lid. A barrier imposed by Celestia to hide the truth of this world."

She pointed upward.

"And the Administrator you speak of... she sits **beyond** that lid."

Nahida's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Extremely distant. In a place where even the stars of Teyvat cannot shine. A layer of reality that looks down on us all."

She pointed to the northwest.

"If you want to understand the laws of this world... and how to break them... you must go to **Fontaine**. The Nation of Justice."

"Fontaine?" Haruka asked.

"The Hydro Archon, **Focalors**, presides over judgment," Nahida explained. "She judges not just mortals, but the gods themselves. If anyone knows the laws that bind the Administrator... it is her."

"Then we go to Fontaine," Tsukasa declared. "We shall put this 'System' on trial!"

"Be careful," Nahida warned. "Fontaine is a nation of spectacle and drama. But underneath the opera... there is a prophecy of doom. A prophecy that says everyone will dissolve into the sea."

"Dissolve?" Ichika shuddered.

"Water," Mafuyu murmured. "Just like the Empty Sekai turned to gray dust... they turn to water."

"Go," Nahida smiled, placing a hand on Ichika’s arm. "You have Wisdom now. Use it to find Justice."

The Departure

The next morning, they stood at the gates of Sumeru City.

Collei ran up to them, holding a bag of dried fruits. "For the road!"

"Thank you, Collei," Ichika smiled.

"Don't get lost in the next nation!" Tighnari called out.

Alhaitham stood by the gate, reading a book. He didn't look up, but he raised a hand in a silent wave.

"Goodbye, Sumeru!" Paimon cheered.

As they walked toward the road that would lead them through the desert and eventually to the port for Fontaine, Mafuyu looked up at the sky.

It was blue. It was beautiful. And it was a cage.

‘A lid,’ she thought.

She touched her mask.

‘I will break it.’

Chapter 108: [Filler] Chapter 85: The Sea of Lights

Location: Sumeru-Liyue Border (Caravan Route)

The road to the desert port was dusty and long. The troupe trudged along, packs heavy with supplies for the voyage to Fontaine.

"Water..." Tsukasa rasped, fanning himself with a palm leaf. "I require hydration! And perhaps a spotlight that isn't the actual sun!"

"Stop complaining," Haruka passed him a canteen. "We're almost at the checkpoint. Then it's a boat to Fontaine."

"Excuse me! Travelers!"

A merchant with a cart full of bamboo and paper flagged them down. He looked frantic.

"Are you heading to Liyue Harbor? Can you help me push this cart? It’s stuck in the sand!"

"Liyue?" Aether paused. "We're heading to Fontaine."

"Fontaine?" The merchant wiped sweat from his brow. "Now? But you'll miss the **Lantern Rite**! The preparations for the Mingxiao Lantern are already halfway done!"

"Lantern Rite?" Ichika asked.

"It’s Liyue’s biggest festival!" The merchant beamed. "We release thousands of lanterns into the sky to guide the souls of heroes home. This year, we're building a massive lamp to honor **Skybracer**! It’s going to be the biggest light show in history!"

Tsukasa froze mid-sip.

"Biggest... light show?" Tsukasa lowered the canteen slowly. "In history?"

"Tsukasa-senpai," Haruka warned. "We have a schedule. The Hydro Archon..."

"Can wait!" Tsukasa declared, spinning around. "Justice is eternal, but a festival is fleeting! We cannot miss a cultural phenomenon of this magnitude! Think of the lighting techniques! The stage direction!"

He looked at the group with puppy-dog eyes.

"Plus... Xiao said to call his name. Shouldn't we invite him?"

Mafuyu looked up. "The Yaksha. He is always alone."

"Okay," Aether sighed, smiling. "We can take a detour. One week. Then we go to Fontaine."

"Huzzah!" Tsukasa cheered. "To Liyue! To the lights!"

Location: Liyue Harbor

The city was transformed. The usually red buildings were adorned with glowing Xiao Lanterns. In the center of the harbor, a colossal wooden frame was being constructed—the **Skybracer** lantern, shaped like a majestic deer.

"It’s huge," Ichika gasped.

"Hey! You made it!"

Xiangling ran up to them, holding a skewer of grilled tiger fish. "I heard from Beidou you were back! Are you here for the Rite?"

"We are here to observe and assist!" Tsukasa announced. "Who is the director of this production?"

"That would be **Wang'ya**," Xiangling pointed to a stressed-looking woman near the docks. "But she’s having trouble. She wants to invite the Adepti as guests of honor, but... well, you know how they are."

"They don't like crowds," Haruka guessed.

"Especially Xiao," Paimon noted. "He always sits on the roof and watches from far away."

"That is unacceptable!" Tsukasa crossed his arms. "A festival is a shared experience! To watch from the cheap seats when you are the VIP is a tragedy! We must correct this script!"

Location: Wangshu Inn - Rooftop

They found Xiao exactly where they expected him—on the balcony, staring at the distant lights of the harbor.

"You called?" Xiao turned, his spear vanishing. **"I heard the loud one shouting my name from the bridge."**

"We came to invite you," Ichika said gently. "To the Lantern Rite. The city wants to thank you."

"No," Xiao turned back to the view. **"I am a weapon. My karma brings misfortune to mortals. If I enter the city, I will only taint the festivities. The lights are... too bright for me."**

"Too bright?" Mafuyu stepped forward.

She stood next to him at the railing.

"I used to think that too," Mafuyu said. "That the lights were for other people. That I didn't belong in the warmth."

Xiao looked at her. He remembered her diving into the dragon’s corruption.

"And now?" Xiao asked.

"Now," Mafuyu touched the white mask at her belt. "I think the lights are just lights. They don't burn. They just... show you where you are."

"Listen, Xiao!" Tsukasa jumped onto the railing (wobbling slightly). "You protect the city, yes? You fight the darkness so they can live in the light! But what is the point of saving the show if you never watch the performance?!"

"It is not about watching," Xiao scowled. "It is about duty."

"Duty is boring!" Tsukasa declared. "Come down. Eat grilled fish. Watch the lanterns. If the karma gets too heavy... we will carry it with you! We are the Teyvat Expedition Team! We carry heavy things all the time! Like Ichika's sword!"

"Hey!" Ichika protested.

Xiao looked at them. They were noisy. They were fragile. They were annoying.

And they had saved his life in the Chasm.

"Fine," Xiao sighed, the ghost of a smile touching his lips. **"I will... accompany you to the outskirts. But I will not dance."**

"We'll work on that!" Tsukasa grinned.

The Night of the Rite

The climax of the festival arrived.

The massive Skybracer lantern was lit. It floated up from the harbor, glowing with a golden brilliance that turned night into day. Behind it, thousands of smaller Xiao Lanterns rose like a river of stars flowing upward.

The troupe stood on a hill overlooking the city.

"Make a wish," Paimon said. "Everyone release a lantern!"

Haruka released hers. *‘To finding a stage where everyone can smile.’* **Ichika** released hers. *‘To finding the melody that reaches them.’* **Tsukasa** released his (it was slightly larger and had a star painted on it). *‘To Saki. Watch me, even from far away!’*

Mafuyu held her lantern. She looked at the warm light flickering inside the paper.

She didn't wish for herself. She thought of the **Administrator**—the lonely system beyond the sky.

‘I hope you can see this too,’ Mafuyu thought, letting the lantern go.

Xiao stood a few feet away, arms crossed. He watched the sea of lights reflected in his golden eyes.

"It is... not unpleasant," Xiao admitted.

"See?" Tsukasa slapped him on the back. "The view is better from the front row!"

Xiao didn't push him away.

As the lights drifted higher, reaching toward the false sky, Aether looked at the stars.

"Ready for Fontaine?" Aether asked.

"Ready," Ichika nodded.

"The show must go on," Tsukasa adjusted his collar. "But this... this was a good intermission."

They watched the lights until they faded into the darkness, a million wishes burning against the cold of the night.

Chapter 109: Interlude VI: The Shattered Screen

Location: Shibuya Crossing
Time: 17:00 (Rush Hour)

The busiest intersection in the world was drowning in noise. Cars, footsteps, chatter.

An Shiraishi stood by the Hachiko exit, scanning the crowd. She looked exhausted.

"Anything?" **Kohane** asked, clutching her camera strap.

"No," An gritted her teeth. "I checked the back alleys. I checked the live houses. Akito isn't anywhere. It's been days, Kohane. He doesn't just vanish."

Toya stood silently beside them, staring at his phone. "The police... they think it's a runaway pact. But Akito wouldn't leave Rad Weekend behind."

Across the street, **Saki Tenma** was leaning against **Honami**, looking pale. **Shiho** was on the phone with Ichika's mother, shaking her head.

"No news," Shiho whispered. "Tsukasa and Ichika... the trail is cold."

Suddenly, a sound cut through the noise of the city.

It wasn't a siren. It wasn't an ad.

It was a melody.

A soft, white noise—like the beginning of an "Untitled" track—played from every speaker in the crossing. The giant LCD screens flickered. The advertisements for energy drinks and new idols dissolved into pure, blinding white light.

Then, five voices spoke at once. They didn't sound robotic. They sounded desperate.

"Can you hear us?"

On the screens, the Virtual Singers appeared. But they weren't in their usual Sekais. They were standing in a void of swirling colors—blue, yellow, green, purple, and orange.

"The walls are broken," Miku's voice echoed. **"Find each other." "Go to the place where the song begins."**

A map flashed briefly on the screens. A single location pulsing with a faint, warm light: **The Weekend Garage.**

And beneath it, five names faded in and out like lyrics on a karaoke screen: *Tsukasa Tenma. Ichika Hoshino. Haruka Kiritani. Mafuyu Asahina. Akito Shinonome.*

"Akito!" An gasped, her heart skipping a beat.

"Onii-chan!" Saki screamed.

Across the crowd, **Minori**, **Airi**, and **Shizuku** looked up in horror. **Rui**, **Nene**, and **Emu** froze near the station. **Kanade**, **Ena**, and **Mizuki** stared at the screen.

They didn't need a "System Alert." They felt it. A pull in their chests. A resonance.

They ran.

Location: Weekend Garage (Vivid Bad Squad's Cafe)

The cafe was closed, but the lights were on.

One by one, the groups burst in.

"Where is he?!" An shouted at the first group she saw (Leo/need). "Do you know where Akito is?!"

"We don't know!" Saki shouted back, tears streaming down her face. "We're looking for my brother and Ichika!"

"Haruka-chan is missing too!" Minori cried, running in with MMJ.

"Everyone, calm down!" **Rui Kamishiro** stepped into the cafe, followed by Nene and Emu. He slammed the door shut and locked it. He looked serious. Terrifyingly serious.

"We are not here to fight," Rui stated. "We are here because the **Feelings** called us."

"Feelings?" **Mizuki Akiyama** stepped out from the back, Kanade and Ena behind them. "You mean the Sekai."

Silence.

Every head turned. The air in the cafe grew heavy.

"You know?" **Toya** whispered.

"We all know," **Kanade** said softly. Her eyes were dark with lack of sleep. "We all have 'Untitled' on our phones. We all have a world born from our hearts."

She looked around the room.

"And we all lost someone to the **Red Silence**."

The secret was out. The barriers between the units shattered instantly under the weight of shared trauma.

"So it's true," **Shizuku** covered her mouth. "Haruka-chan... she didn't get lost. She was taken by the music."

"Taken," Rui corrected. He pulled out a tablet. He didn't show code. He showed a visualizer —a line of light that usually represented a song. "I've been tracking the resonance since Tsukasa-kun vanished. Look."

The line wasn't moving. It was flat. But at the very end, there was a faint, jagged spike.

"The song didn't stop," Rui said grimly. "It was moved. To a place our phones can't reach."

"Another Sekai?" **Nene** whispered.

"No," **MEIKO's voice** came from Ken's laptop behind the counter.

The screen lit up. **Street Sekai MEIKO** appeared. But behind her, the other Virtual Singers were visible—**Wonderland KAITO**, **School Miku**, **Stage Luka**, **Nightcord Miku**.

They were all in the same room. The boundaries between their worlds had dissolved.

"We linked our feelings," **Nightcord Miku** said, her voice soft and echoey. "Because we found... a dissonance."

She pointed to the screen. A jagged, violent orange waveform appeared. It wasn't a song. It was a scream made of light. It pulsed with a dark, corrupt violet color.

"This is Akito Shinonome's melody."

The room went cold.

"It sounds... wrong," **Kohane** whispered, covering her ears.

"It is twisting," **Street MEIKO** said grimly. "His feelings are being eaten by something dark. Something foreign. If this continues... his song will fade completely."

An's legs gave out. Toya caught her.

"No," An whispered. "He promised... we'd surpass Rad Weekend."

"The others?" Saki asked, terrified. "Is Onii-chan...?"

"Faint, but steady," **School Miku** said. "Ichika is struggling. Tsukasa is protecting. Haruka is guiding. Mafuyu is... observing."

"They are alive," **Minori** clenched her fists. "They are still singing. So we have to answer them!"

"But how?" **Emu** asked, tears in her eyes. "We can't go there! The Red Light blocks us!"

"We build a bridge," **Rui** declared.

He looked at Kanade.

"You compose, correct? You write songs to save people."

Kanade nodded.

"And you," Rui looked at Saki, Toya, and the others. "You are musicians. Actors. Performers."

Rui pointed at the screen.

"The place they are in... it responds to **Wishes**. To ambition. If we can create a song... a performance... powerful enough to resonate with all five Sekais at once..."

"We can break the silence," **Mizuki** finished the thought, grinning sharply. "We can force the door open with sheer volume."

"It has to be perfect," **Haruka's** voice echoed in Minori's memory. *'Stability.'*

"We will make it perfect," **An** stood up. The fear in her eyes was gone, replaced by the burning fury of the Vivid Bad Squad. "If Akito is in pain... I'm going to scream loud enough to shatter the sky."

"We're in," **Saki** wiped her eyes. "For Onii-chan. For Ichika."

"For everyone," **Kanade** said. "I will write the melody."

In the small cafe in Shibuya, an alliance was formed.

They weren't just students anymore. They were an orchestra tuning up for the most important performance of their lives.

Rui cracked his knuckles.

"Alright," Rui said. "Let's make a miracle."

Chapter 110: Chapter 86: The Madam and the Lost Time

Location: Sumeru City - Puspa Café

The troupe was enjoying a rare moment of peace before the long journey to Fontaine. **Tsukasa** was trying to teach a parrot to say "World Future Star," while **Haruka** and **Ichika** reviewed their supplies.

Aether walked in, holding a commission paper.

"We have a job," Aether said. "It’s from a researcher named **Vikram**. He claims to have found a hundred-year-old logbook near the outskirts of the desert. He says it describes a mechanism that can 'manipulate the flow of time'."

"Time travel?" **Mafuyu** looked up from her book. Her eyes sharpened. "If we can control time... maybe we can go back to the moment the red cubes appeared."

"Or freeze the deadline for our next show!" Tsukasa added.

"Vikram says the log mentions a 'Great Scholar' who vanished into the ruins a century ago," Aether explained. "He needs bodyguards to retrieve the mechanism."

Location: Ruins near Pardis Dhyai

They met the researcher, Vikram, at the entrance to a crumbling temple buried in vines.

"This is it!" Vikram adjusted his glasses excitedly. "The text says the 'Great Scholar' entered here and never returned. If I find her research, I’ll get tenure!"

"Her research?" a voice scoffed from above.

They looked up. Sitting on top of a stone pillar, swinging her legs, was a girl with twin-tails the color of turquoise. She wore a dress that looked like a blend of Akademiya uniform and ancient mechanics.

Faruzan.

"You youngsters are always so eager to loot the past," Faruka hopped down, landing gracefully. "But you lack the respect for the architecture! Look at this lintel! It's clearly early Classical period, yet you're stomping around like sumpter beasts!"

"Who are you?" Tsukasa asked. "A child lost in the woods?"

"Child?!" Faruzan put her hands on her hips. "I am **Faruzan**! You may address me as **Madam Faruzan**! I am a researcher of the Haravatat Darshan, and I have been studying ruins since before your grandparents were born!"

"She... looks very young for a grandmother," Ichika whispered to Aether.

"I heard that!" Faruzan pointed a finger. "I was trapped in a puzzle domain for a hundred years! My body didn't age, but my wisdom is vast! Now, show some respect!"

Vikram turned pale. "Faruzan? The 'Legendary Mechanic' who vanished? You're alive?"

"Obviously," Faruzan huffed. "Now, move aside. You mentioned a logbook. If it's from a hundred years ago... it might be mine."

The Puzzle

They entered the ruins. It was a mess of rotating gears and light beams.

"A Primal Construct mechanism," Faruzan identified it instantly. "Sloppy design. The energy flow is inefficient."

She walked up to a console.

"You there! The loud boy with the coat!" Faruzan pointed at Tsukasa.

"I am Tsukasa Tenma!"

"Tsukasa, rotate the left gear three times. Blue-haired girl, align the prism. Blonde boy, hit the switch when I say go."

"She’s bossy," Paimon grumbled.

"She’s a director," Haruka noted with a smile. "She knows exactly what she wants."

They followed her instructions.

Click. Whir. SNAP.

The massive stone door groaned open.

"Hmph," Faruzan dusted off her hands. "Simple geometry. In my day, puzzles had more bite."

Inside the chamber, there was no time machine. There was only a small, dusty desk with a rotting book on it.

Vikram rushed forward. "The artifact! The time manipulation device!"

Faruzan walked past him. She picked up the book. Her expression softened.

"This isn't a device," Faruzan said quietly. "It's a diary."

She opened the brittle pages.

"Day 400. The puzzle remains unsolved. I miss my mother's cooking. Does she still wait for me?" "Day 3,000. I have forgotten the sound of the wind. I only hear the gears." "Day... I have stopped counting. If anyone finds this... please tell them I didn't give up. I just ran out of time."

Silence filled the room.

Vikram looked disappointed. "It's just... scribbles? No blueprints? No ancient tech?"

"Just scribbles?" Tsukasa's voice dropped low. He walked over and looked at the book. "This is a script of solitude. A tragedy of a hundred years."

He looked at Faruzan.

"You were alone," Tsukasa said. "For a century."

Faruzan closed the book. She didn't cry. She just looked tired.

"The world moved on," Faruzan said. "When I finally solved the puzzle and escaped... my family was gone. My friends were dust. The Sumeru I knew was history."

She looked at Mafuyu.

"It feels like being a ghost, doesn't it? Walking through a world that doesn't recognize you."

Mafuyu stared at her.

"Yes," Mafuyu whispered. "It feels like being left behind."

Faruzan sighed. She tucked the book into her dress.

"But," Faruzan looked up, a spark returning to her eyes. "I am still here. I am Madam Faruzan! And if the world has changed, then I will simply have to teach it how to be proper again!"

She pointed at the troupe.

"You lot! You have potential! Your coordination in the puzzle was adequate! Perhaps I should take you on as students! I can teach you the ancient mechanics of stagecraft!"

"Stagecraft?" Tsukasa's ears perked up. "Ancient special effects?"

"The best!" Faruzan bragged. "Light prisms! Levitating platforms! I can build you a stage that defies gravity!"

"Madam Faruzan!" Tsukasa bowed dramatically. "Please teach us! The Teyvat Expedition Team requires your wisdom!"

"Hahaha! Finally, someone with respect!" Faruzan laughed.

As they walked out of the ruins, leaving the disappointed Vikram behind, Haruka walked beside Faruzan.

"You missed a hundred years," Haruka said. "Do you... regret it?"

Faruzan looked at the sky.

"I regret the time lost with my family," Faruzan admitted. "But... I survived. And now, I have new students to annoy. Life continues, little idol. Even after the intermission."

Mafuyu watched Faruzan bickering with Tsukasa about gear ratios.

'She was trapped in a box,' Mafuyu thought. *'But she broke out. And she is still loud.'*

It was a small comfort. But it was there.

Chapter 111: Chapter 87: The Golden Slumber

Location: Aaru Village

"I refuse!" Tsukasa Tenma crossed his arms, standing in the shadow of the village chief's house. "We have saved the nation! We have defeated a mecha-god! We have endured the Chasm! I demand a vacation! Or at least a climate with air conditioning!"

"We're broke, Senpai," Haruka said flatly, holding up their money pouch. It was light. Painfully light.

"Broke?" Tsukasa deflated. "But... the reward from the Qixing?"

"Spent on upgrading our weapons," Ichika reminded him, patting her Whiteblind. "And the rest went to restocking supplies for the desert crossing."

"We can't afford a boat to Fontaine," Aether sighed, checking the commission board. "We need Mora. Fast."

"Look at this one," Paimon pointed to a flyer. "An archaeological expedition into the deeper desert ruins. The employer is a scholar from the Akademiya. The pay is... wow."

"How many zeroes?" Tsukasa leaned in. His eyes turned into Mora symbols. "That is a budget worthy of a blockbuster! Very well! The Teyvat Expedition Team accepts this encore performance in the sand!"

Mafuyu adjusted her hood. "More sand. Hooray."

Location: The Road to the Ruins

They met their employer near the edge of the Great Red Sand. He was an indoor scholar, sweating profusely and complaining about the wind.

Tirzad.

"Finally!" Tirzad wiped his glasses. "I requested bodyguards, not a circus troupe! Do you even know how to handle ancient relics?"

"We handled the Holy Lyre," Haruka said coolly. "We can handle some rocks."

Standing behind Tirzad were two mercenaries. A tall, stoic man with a weathered face and a massive axe, and a young girl with bright eyes and twin daggers.

Jebrael and **Jeht.**

"More city folk," Jebrael grunted, eyeing Tsukasa's flashy coat. "Try not to die of heatstroke in the first hour."

"I am Jeht!" The girl grinned, spinning a dagger. "Don't mind my old man. He's just grumpy because the sand gets in his boots. You guys look tough! Is that a Liyue claymore?"

"It is!" Ichika smiled, relieved to meet someone friendly. "I'm Ichika. We're... adventurers."

"Let's get moving," Tirzad snapped. "The **Golden Slumber** awaits! If I prove the existence of King Deshret's technology, I'll finally get my paper published!"

The Ruins: Meeting Benben

They descended into the sinkhole known as the **Abdju Road**. The ruins here were different from the Mausoleum—older, stranger.

"This door is locked," Aether noted. "We need clearance."

"Allow me," Tirzad pulled out a stone slate. "I have the—"

Beep. Whir.

A strange, floating mechanical triangle drifted out from the shadows. It clicked and chirped, hovering around Jeht.

"A monster!" Paimon shrieked.

"Wait!" Jeht laughed. "It's cute! Look, it likes me!"

"It is a Primal Construct," Mafuyu said, readying her catalyst. "Dangerous."

"No, look at its behavior," Tsukasa stepped closer, fascinated. "It is not attacking. It is... emoting? Hello, little geometric friend!"

The machine beeped happily at Tsukasa. *Wooo-wop.*

"I shall name him... **Benben**!" Jeht declared.

"Benben?" Tirzad scoffed. "It is a machine intelligence from the golden era! You cannot name it like a pet!"

"Benben likes it," Jeht stuck her tongue out.

With Benben's help (and the slate), the doors opened.

The Father and The Daughter

As they ventured deeper, solving puzzles involving light beams and sandglasses, the group split slightly.

Tsukasa found himself walking with **Jebrael**.

"You are quiet," Tsukasa noted. "A stoic archetype? The silent guardian?"

"I talk when necessary," Jebrael grunted. He watched Jeht up ahead, who was laughing with Ichika and Paimon while fighting off a scorpion.

"She is spirited," Tsukasa said, following his gaze.

"She is reckless," Jebrael corrected. But his eyes were soft. "She wants to prove she doesn't need me. She wants to be an adventurer. She doesn't know the desert eats the unprepared."

Tsukasa smiled. He thought of Saki.

"She wants to shine," Tsukasa said. "It is natural. A parent—or a guardian—wants to keep them safe in the wings. But eventually... they have to step onto the stage."

Jebrael looked at Tsukasa. "You speak like you have someone to protect."

"My sister," Tsukasa nodded. "She is frail. I used to worry that the world would break her. But... she is stronger than I gave her credit for."

Jebrael was silent for a long time.

"Jeht is all I have," Jebrael whispered. "Her mother... the sand took her. If I lose Jeht..."

"You won't," Tsukasa patted the mercenary’s armored shoulder. "Because we are here. And we make excellent bodyguards."

The Dream of the Golden Slumber

They reached the deepest chamber. **Khemenu Temple**.

The air was thick with the memories of the Scarlet King.

Tirzad was having a panic attack near a mural. "It’s all true! The Golden Slumber... the collective consciousness! King Deshret tried to upload his people’s minds to a paradise beyond death!"

"Upload minds?" Mafuyu froze. "Like the Akasha?"

"Like the Sekai," Aether whispered.

"He failed," Jebrael said grimly. "The forbidden knowledge corrupted the dream. It turned paradise into a nightmare."

"But we can fix the mechanism!" Jeht insisted. "If we clear the corruption, we can open the path to the surface! We can finish the expedition!"

"It’s too dangerous," Jebrael argued.

"I'm doing it!" Jeht ran toward the control panel.

"Jeht!"

A massive **Primal Construct** materialized—the guardian of the dream. It aimed a laser at Jeht.

"Look out!" Haruka yelled.

Combat Start.

Jebrael moved faster than a man his size should. He tackled Jeht out of the way, taking the laser blast on his axe.

"Dad!" Jeht screamed.

"Formation!" Aether commanded.

Tsukasa and **Ichika** flanked the machine. **"Geo Impact!"** Tsukasa summoned a pillar to block the machine's path. **"Shatter!"** Ichika swung her Whiteblind, smashing the construct's leg.

Mafuyu saw the energy flow. "The core! It is charging!"

Haruka vaulted off Tsukasa's pillar. **"Starglitter Strike!"** She drove her spear into the construct's eye.

Jebrael finished it. With a roar, he swung his axe, cleaving the machine in two.

The Payment

They emerged from the ruins, back into the blinding sun of the surface.

Tirzad was hugging his notes. "I have it! I have the proof! I'm going to be a sage!"

"You owe us," Haruka reminded him, hand out.

"Yes, yes!" Tirzad handed over a heavy sack of Mora. "Take it! It's worth every penny to get out of that hole!"

Jeht hugged Jebrael. "You saved me, old man."

"Don't be reckless," Jebrael grunted, but he hugged her back awkwardly.

Tsukasa watched them.

"A happy ending," Tsukasa nodded, satisfied. "The father protects the daughter. The scholars get their papers. And we get paid!"

"We have enough for the boat now," Aether confirmed. "Fontaine is waiting."

As they walked away, Mafuyu looked back at Jebrael. He was staring at the ruins with a look of profound sorrow—a look that said he knew secrets he hadn't shared.

'He is hiding something,' Mafuyu thought. *'Just like Alhaitham. Just like Venti.'*

But for now, the desert was behind them.

Chapter 112: Chapter 88: The Dream of the Burning Sand

Location: Khaj-Nisut - The Eye of the Sands

They had the Mora. They had the supplies. They were ready to leave.

But as they packed their bags near the oasis, the ground shook.

"Not an earthquake," Ichika grabbed her claymore instinctively. "Footsteps."

A massive group of Eremites emerged from the dunes. They weren't the ragtag bandits from before. They wore the crimson sashes of the **Thutmose**, led by a man with a voice like grinding stones.

Samail.

"Jebrael," Samail sneered, his eyes greedy as he looked at the stone slate in Tirzad's hand. "You found the key. After all these years... you finally found the path to the Golden Slumber."

"Samail," Jebrael stepped forward, shielding Jeht. "This doesn't concern you. Go back to your raiding."

"It concerns the Throne!" Samail roared. "King Deshret's promise! A world without pain! A world where we are all one! You betrayed us, Jebrael. You chose a woman over a god. And now... I will take what is mine."

"A rival from the past!" Tsukasa gasped, clutching his sword. "The backstory thickens! Jebrael, you did not tell us you had a nemesis!"

"He is a traitor," Jebrael growled. "And a madman."

"Get them!" Samail ordered.

The Race to the Throne

The battle was chaos. The Thutmose outnumbered them three to one.

"Go!" Jebrael shouted, swinging his axe to decapitate a mechanical construct Samail had summoned. "Traveler! Take the slate! Get to the Throne Room! If Samail reaches the Golden Slumber, he will control the ruins!"

"We're going!" Aether grabbed the slate from a terrified Tirzad.

They sprinted toward the massive floating pyramid of **Khaj-Nisut**.

"Benben, open the door!" Jeht yelled.

The little machine beeped frantically, firing a beam of light that unlocked the massive energy barrier.

They rushed inside. The interior of Khaj-Nisut was a labyrinth of invisible walls and floating platforms.

"Invisible mazes?!" Haruka groaned, hitting a barrier with her hand. "This feels like a game show obstacle course!"

"Follow the floor patterns!" Mafuyu pointed. "The light guides the way."

They navigated the puzzles, climbing higher and higher until they reached the **Throne of King Deshret**.

But Samail was already there. He had used a back entrance known only to the Thutmose.

He stood before the massive, glowing throne. A swirling vortex of golden data—ancient memories and souls—hovered above it.

"The Golden Slumber," Samail whispered, entranced. "Eternal peace. No more hunger. No more thirst. Just... existence."

"Stop!" Jeht screamed, throwing a dagger.

Samail didn't dodge. He stepped *into* the beam.

"I accept the gift!"

BZZEEEEEE.

The golden light swallowed him.

"He... he uploaded himself?" Ichika asked, horrified.

"He merged with the collective," Alhaitham (if he were here) would have said. But Mafuyu understood.

She looked at the golden light. She heard the voices inside. Thousands of them. Screaming. Laughing. Crying. All at once.

"It isn't peace," Mafuyu whispered, clutching her head. "It is noise. It is a server with no moderator. It is hell."

"JEBRAEL!"

Samail’s voice boomed from the walls. The entire pyramid began to shake. The statues of the jackals animated, their eyes glowing red.

"I AM THE KING NOW! DIE!"

The Hierophant's Trial

"We have to shut it down!" Jebrael yelled, hacking at a stone statue. "Traveler! The control panel! Use the slate to terminate the connection!"

"Tsukasa! Haruka! Cover me!" Aether shouted, running for the throne.

"Defense formation!" Haruka ordered.

Tsukasa unleashed a Geo shockwave, creating a wall of stone pillars to block the lasers firing from the walls. "The stage is hostile! I repeat, the stage is hostile!"

Ichika swung **Whiteblind**, smashing a mechanical spider that tried to jump Aether.

Mafuyu stood in the center. She felt the crushing weight of Samail's consciousness trying to overwrite them.

'Submit,' the voice in her head screamed. *'Become one with the sand.'*

"No," Mafuyu said.

She raised her **Eye of Perception**. She channeled her Anemo resonance—the power of rejection.

"Disconnect."

She fired a bolt of disrupting energy at the golden vortex. It didn't stop it, but it caused static. The voice of Samail glitched.

"G-G-Get... out..."

"Now, Aether!"

Aether slammed the slate into the terminal. **"System Shutdown!"**

CRASH.

The golden beam died. The vortex collapsed.

Samail's scream echoed as his consciousness was purged from the system, deleted like a corrupted file.

The pyramid groaned. It began to sink.

"It's collapsing!" Jeht yelled. "We have to leave!"

The Escape

They slid down the ramps, dodging falling debris. They burst out of the front door just as the entrance sealed itself, burying the secrets of the Scarlet King once more.

They lay on the sand, panting.

"Is it... over?" Tirzad peeked out from behind a rock.

"Samail is gone," Jebrael said, staring at the sealed door. "And the Golden Slumber... is silent."

Jeht walked over to her father. She looked at him—really looked at him—for the first time in years.

"You saved us," Jeht said. "You fought him."

"He was my brother in arms once," Jebrael admitted, his voice heavy with regret. "But he lost his way. I promised your mother I would protect you from that life. From the lie of the Golden Slumber."

He placed a hand on Jeht’s head.

"I failed to keep you away from the danger. But... I will not fail to keep you alive."

Jeht teared up. She hugged him. "Stupid old man."

Tsukasa watched them, wiping dust from his face.

"A redemption arc," Tsukasa noted softly. "And a reconciliation. A fitting end to the chapter."

"Let's go," Haruka said, helping Ichika up. "We have our Mora. We have our lives. And I think we're done with tombs for a while."

"Agreed," Mafuyu nodded, looking at the sealed pyramid.

‘A world where everyone is one,’ she thought. *‘It sounds lonely in a different way.’*

Chapter 113: Chapter 89: The Eternal Dream

Location: Khaj-Nisut - The Throne Room

The golden light of the throne was blinding. **Samail's** laughter echoed from everywhere at once, his physical form dissolved into the swirling vortex of data and souls that made up the Golden Slumber.

"You cannot stop the future!" Samail's voice boomed. **"The Scarlet King's dream is inevitable! Join us, Jebrael! Join Ufairah in the eternal peace!"**

"Don't speak her name!" Jebrael roared, swinging his axe at a manifestation of golden sand. But the sand just reformed.

"Physical attacks are useless," **Mafuyu** shouted over the noise, clutching her **Eye of Perception**. "He is not a body anymore. He is a signal. A virus in the system."

"Can we delete him?" **Tsukasa** asked, dodging a laser beam from a Primal Construct. "Like we did with the Akasha?"

"We don't have a terminal," **Aether** gritted his teeth. "We can't interface with it!"

The room began to shake. The Golden Slumber was expanding. It wasn't just a beam anymore; it was a tide, threatening to swallow them all.

Jebrael looked at the vortex. He looked at Samail's distorted face within the light.

He lowered his axe.

"There is one way," Jebrael said quietly.

He turned to **Jeht**.

"Jeht. Give me the stone slate."

"Dad?" Jeht blinked, tears mixing with the dust on her face. "What are you going to do?"

"Samail is inside the dream," Jebrael explained, his voice steady. "To kill him... I have to go inside too. I have to drag him into the oblivion of the eternal sleep."

"No!" Jeht grabbed his arm. "If you go in there... you won't come back! You'll be trapped!"

"It's the only way to close the door," Jebrael said. He looked at the troupe. "Traveler. Take her. Get them out of here."

"Wait!" **Tsukasa** stepped forward, his expression frantic. "This is a tragedy! We can rewrite it! We can find another way!"

"Not all stories have a happy ending, boy," Jebrael looked at Tsukasa with a sad smile. "Sometimes... the father has to leave the stage so the child can have her own spotlight."

He ripped his arm free from Jeht's grip. He grabbed the slate from Aether.

"Dad! NO!" Jeht screamed.

Jebrael didn't look back. He walked into the light.

"Jebrael?!" Samail's voice turned from arrogant to terrified. **"What are you doing?! You cannot handle the weight of the King's mind!"**

"I don't need to handle it," Jebrael said, his body beginning to dissolve into golden particles. "I just need to break it."

He lunged.

Inside the pillar of light, two silhouettes clashed—one red, one gold.

Then, a blinding flash.

CRACK.

The throne shattered. The golden vortex imploded, sucking the light, the sound, and the two men into a singularity of nothingness.

Then silence.

The room was dark. The only light came from the glowing blue lines on the Primal Constructs, which powered down and fell to the floor, lifeless.

Jebrael was gone.

On the floor, where he had stood, lay his heavy axe.

The Escape

"Dad..." Jeht fell to her knees, reaching for the empty air.

"The structure is unstable!" **Tirzad** shouted, though his voice was shaking. "The load-bearing energy is gone! We have to leave!"

"I'm not leaving him!" Jeht sobbed.

"Jeht!" **Haruka** grabbed the girl's shoulders. She didn't use her idol voice. She used her strength. "He did this so you would live. Don't waste it."

Haruka pulled Jeht up. Jeht was limp, traumatized. **Ichika** grabbed Jebrael's axe, strapping it to her back beside her claymore.

"Run!" Aether commanded.

They sprinted down the ramps of Khaj-Nisut as the floating pyramid began to crumble. Debris rained down around them. They leaped across widening gaps, sliding down the sand chutes until they burst out of the main entrance.

They tumbled onto the dunes of the surface, coughing and gasping.

Behind them, the massive door of Khaj-Nisut slammed shut with a finality that shook the desert.

Location: The Oasis

The sun was setting over the desert. The sky was a bruised purple.

Jeht sat on a rock, staring at the sand. She wasn't crying anymore. She just looked empty.

Tirzad stood nearby. The usually arrogant, complaining scholar was silent. He took off his glasses and wiped them.

He walked over to Jeht. He hesitated, then sat down awkwardly beside her.

"I..." Tirzad started. "I wrote my thesis. I proved the Golden Slumber existed."

Jeht didn't respond.

"It... it isn't worth it," Tirzad whispered.

He looked at his notebook.

"I treated him like a hired sword. A brute. But he... he was a greater man than any Sage in the Akademiya."

Tirzad placed the notebook on the rock next to Jeht.

"I will write his name in the paper," Tirzad promised, his voice thick with emotion. "Not as a servant. But as a partner. Jebrael of the Tanit. The man who saved the expedition."

Jeht looked at the notebook. She picked it up slowly.

"He wanted to retire," Jeht whispered. "He wanted to sit by an oasis and drink tea. He hated the sand."

Tsukasa stood a distance away, looking at the sealed ruins. He wasn't posing. He wasn't shouting. He just looked defeated.

"I couldn't save him," Tsukasa murmured to **Mafuyu**. "I am supposed to be the hero. But I just watched."

Mafuyu looked at Jeht. She saw the grief. It was raw, messy, and loud. Unlike the silence of the Sekai.

"You cannot save everyone, Senpai," Mafuyu said quietly. "Sometimes... people choose to end their own story."

She touched the white mask at her hip.

"But he left something behind," Mafuyu noted, looking at Ichika, who was cleaning the sand off Jebrael's axe. "He left a legacy."

Haruka walked over to Jeht. She placed a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"We have to go," Haruka said gently. "But you don't have to go alone. Come with us to the edge of the desert."

Jeht stood up. She took the axe from Ichika. It was heavy, but she lifted it.

"No," Jeht said. Her eyes were dry now. Hard. "I have to go to the **Tanit Camps**. My father's tribe. I need to tell them what happened."

She looked at the troupe.

"Thank you. For fighting with him. For treating him like a person."

She turned to walk into the deep desert.

"Goodbye, Jeht," Aether called out.

"See you in the sand," Jeht replied without looking back.

As she walked away, Tirzad took off his hat, pressing it to his chest in respect.

"The desert is cruel," Tirzad sighed. "I think... I think I am done with adventures. I am going back to the Akademiya. To write."

"Write a good story," Tsukasa said softly. "Make sure the audience remembers him."

"I will," Tirzad promised.

Chapter 114: Chapter 90: The Village of Rest

Location: Aaru Village - Entrance

The trek back from Khaj-Nisut was silent. The adrenaline had faded, leaving only the ache in their muscles and the dust in their lungs.

When they finally crossed the suspension bridge into **Aaru Village**, the sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the canyon walls in deep indigo.

"Civilization," Tsukasa breathed out, leaning heavily on his **Flute** sword. "I never thought I would be so happy to see a wooden elevator."

Tirzad stopped at the village gate. He adjusted his glasses, clutching his notebook—the one containing the proof of the Golden Slumber and Jebrael's legacy—tightly to his chest.

"I... must depart here," Tirzad said, looking at the group. "I need to return to the Akademiya immediately. If I don't file this report and secure the funding... Jebrael’s name won't make it into the records."

"Make sure you spell it right," Haruka said, her voice firm but not unkind.

"I will," Tirzad nodded vigorously. He looked at them, then bowed deeply—a gesture of respect he hadn't shown once during the entire expedition. "Thank you. For saving my life. And for... teaching me that history is made by people, not just written in books."

He turned and hurried toward the path to Caravan Ribat, running on a newfound sense of purpose.

"He grew up," Ichika noted, watching him go.

"A minor character arc," Tsukasa admitted. "But a satisfying one."

Location: Village Chief’s House

Candace was waiting for them. She didn't ask questions. She simply took one look at their battered armor, their dusty faces, and the missing mercenary, and she knew.

She ushered them inside. She put a large pot of Aaru Mixed Rice on the table and poured water.

"Eat," Candace ordered gently.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. The warmth of the food began to thaw the numbness of the desert.

"Jebrael is gone," Aether finally said, breaking the silence.

"I see," Candace lowered her eyes. "He was a man of the desert. He chose his end?"

"He sacrificed himself," Mafuyu said quietly. She was staring at her reflection in the water cup. "To stop the Golden Slumber. To save Jeht."

"He entered the data stream," Haruka explained, struggling to find the Teyvat terms. "He merged with the collective consciousness to destroy it from the inside."

Candace closed her eyes. She tapped her shield—a rhythmic, mourning beat.

"The desert is harsh," Candace said softly. "But it remembers. Jebrael's sand will join the dunes, and his story will be sung by the wind."

She looked at the troupe.

"And Jeht? Where is the little falcon?"

"She went to the **Tanit Camps**," Ichika said worriedly. "She said it was her father's tribe. She wanted to tell them what happened."

"The Tanit..." Candace frowned slightly. Her golden eye narrowed. "They are a powerful tribe. But they are... insular. And their matriarch, **Babel**, is a woman of complex ambitions."

"Is Jeht safe there?" Tsukasa asked, sitting up straighter.

"Physically? Perhaps," Candace admitted. "But she just lost her father. She is vulnerable. And the Tanit value strength above all else. If she shows weakness..."

Haruka set her spoon down. She looked at Aether.

"We can't leave for Fontaine yet," Haruka said.

"Agreed," Aether nodded immediately. "We need to check on her."

"The show is not over until the cast is safe!" Tsukasa declared, though he yawned mid-sentence. "We cannot leave a supporting character in a spin-off arc without ensuring a happy resolution!"

"We go tomorrow," Mafuyu decided. "To the Tanit Camps."

The Night Watch

Later that night, while the others slept, Ichika sat on the edge of the cliff overlooking the canyon. She was polishing **Jebrael's Axe**, which Jeht had left with them for safekeeping (or perhaps because it was too heavy to carry alone).

"It's heavy," Ichika whispered.

"It carries a lot of memories," Mafuyu said, stepping out of the shadows.

Mafuyu sat next to her. They dangled their legs over the abyss.

"Do you think..." Ichika hesitated. "Do you think Akito-kun remembers us like Jebrael remembered Ufairah?"

"Jebrael remembered his wife for decades," Mafuyu said, looking at the stars. "Even when he was a traitor. Even when he was running."

She touched the white mask at her belt.

"Memory is stubborn, Ichika. It hides in the cracks. The Abyss can overwrite the code... but I don't think it can delete the source file."

"Source file?" Ichika asked.

"The heart," Mafuyu said.

They sat in silence, watching the moon rise over the desert.

"Tomorrow," Ichika said, standing up and strapping the axe to her back alongside her claymore. "We go find Jeht. And then... we go find Akito."

Chapter 115: Chapter 91: The Matriarch and the Jinni

Location: The Desert of Hadramaveth - Tanit Camps

The landscape changed again. The golden dunes gave way to a jagged, spiraling canyon scarred by eternal sandstorms.

Nestled in the canyon floor was the **Tanit Camp**. Tents made of crocodile leather and woven fabric lined the river.

"Halt!" A sentry blocked their path. "This is Tanit territory. Outsiders are—"

"Let them pass."

A young woman stepped out from the main tent. She wore the garb of the desert, but her eyes were tired. She carried herself with a new, heavy maturity.

Jeht.

"Jeht!" Ichika waved, the heavy axe on her back clanking against her claymore.

"You came," Jeht smiled, though it didn't reach her eyes. "I didn't think I'd see you again."

"We couldn't leave without checking on the script," Tsukasa declared, stepping forward. "A good ensemble always returns for the curtain call!"

"Come," Jeht gestured. "Matriarch Babel wants to see you. She heard about... what happened at Khaj-Nisut."

The Matriarch

The main tent was opulent, filled with carpets and incense. Seated on a throne of cushions was a woman with a calm, motherly smile that felt dangerously sharp.

Babel. Matriarch of the Tanit.

"Welcome, heroes of the Golden Slumber," Babel's voice was smooth like silk. "And welcome, friends of Jebrael... the traitor who found redemption."

Ichika bristled at the word "traitor," but Haruka put a hand on her arm.

"We are just travelers," Haruka said politely. "We came to ensure Jeht is safe."

"She is home," Babel placed a hand on Jeht's shoulder. "She is a daughter of the Tanit. And now, she will finish what her father started. She will find the **Eternal Oasis**."

Mafuyu watched Babel's hand. She watched the way Jeht leaned into the touch, desperate for a parental figure.

'She is using her,' Mafuyu realized instantly. *'She is feeding on her grief.'*

"To find the Oasis," Babel continued, "We need a guide. An ancient spirit sealed in the **Temple of Gurabad**. Jeht has volunteered to retrieve it. Will you assist her?"

"We will," Aether promised.

"Excellent." Babel smiled. "Go. Bring back the Mother of the Jinn."

Location: Safhe Shatranj (The Chessboard)

They trekked to the massive ruins north of the camp. A giant stone chessboard stretched out before a sealed temple.

"The entrance is buried," Jeht said, checking her map. "We need to find the mechanism."

They fought through Primal Constructs—Tsukasa using Geo to block lasers, Ichika smashing cores with her claymore. They descended into the buried halls until they found a strange, glowing tree root.

Nestled in the roots was an ornate, floating bottle.

"A bottle?" Paimon poked it.

"Do not touch me, lower being."

A voice hissed from the bottle. It was feminine, haughty, and dripped with ancient arrogance.

"It talks!" Tsukasa gasped. "A genie in a bottle! A classic archetype of desert folklore!"

"I am not a 'genie'," the bottle glowed pink. **"I am Liloupar. The Mother of the Jinn. And you... you smell of dirt and mortality."**

"She's rude," Haruka noted flatly.

"Great," Jeht sighed. "My new partner is a talking bottle with an attitude problem."

"And you," Liloupar's consciousness focused on **Mafuyu**. **"You are... hollow. A vessel without water. How fascinating. Are you a failed creation of the Lord of Flowers?"**

"I am just Mafuyu," she replied.

"Hmph. Boring."

Liloupar turned her attention to Aether. **"You, golden one. You possess power. I will make a pact with you. I shall guide you to the Eternal Oasis... *if* you restore my fragments."**

"Fragments?" Aether asked.

"My power is shattered," Liloupar explained. **"Scattered across the sands of Gurabad. Find my shards, restore my memory, and I will open the path to the Oasis. Do we have an accord?"**

"Do we have a choice?" Jeht asked.

"No," Liloupar said cheerfully.

The Quest for Fragments

The next few hours were a blur of puzzle-solving and combat.

They navigated the invisible walls of the ruins. Liloupar granted them the power to see through storms, but she never stopped talking.

"Left, you clumsy oaf!" she shouted at Tsukasa as he tripped over a root. *"That spear technique is primitive,"* she critiqued Haruka. *"Where is the elegance? The dance?" "Why do you carry that heavy iron slab?"* she asked Ichika. *"It is ugly."*

"It protects my friends," Ichika grunted, smashing a wall to reveal a hidden path.

They found the first fragment—a glowing shard of pink crystal.

Aether placed it against the bottle.

Flash.

The bottle glowed brighter. The fog around them lifted slightly.

"Ah..." Liloupar sighed. **"I remember now. Gurabad... my city. My beautiful, broken city."**

Her voice lost some of its edge, replaced by a deep, ancient melancholy.

"They are all dead, aren't they? The people. The kings. Even the slaves."

"They've been dead for thousands of years," Jeht said quietly.

"Time," Liloupar mused. **"It is the cruelest master. Very well. My vision is clearer. I can see the path to the next seal."**

She floated toward Mafuyu.

"You," Liloupar said. **"Hollow one. Do you know why I chose this bottle?"**

"No," Mafuyu said.

"Because it is a cage," Liloupar whispered. **"But it is *my* cage. Better to rule a bottle than to serve a tyrant. Remember that, when you choose your own container."**

Mafuyu touched the white mask at her belt.

‘A cage... or a home?’

"We have the fragment," Aether said, wiping dust from his sword. "Let's get back to Babel. She's waiting."

"Babel..." Liloupar scoffed. **"That woman smells of ambition and blood. Be careful, little master. The desert viper does not bite because it is angry. It bites because it is hungry."**

"We know," Haruka said, looking at Jeht’s trusting face. "We'll be watching."

Chapter 116: Chapter 92: The Dirge of Bilqis

Location: Mt. Damavand - The Sandstorm

The sandstorm surrounding the mountain was a wall of physical force. It screamed like a dying beast, tearing at their clothes and blinding their vision.

"We cannot proceed!" Haruka shouted over the gale, shielding her face. "Visibility is zero!"

"Use the bottle!" Paimon yelled.

Aether held up the Jinni bottle.

"Hmph. Helpless mortals," Liloupar scoffed. **"Fine. I shall part the veil. Do not wander off, or the sand will strip the flesh from your bones."**

The bottle glowed. A sphere of calm, clear air expanded around them, pushing the storm back.

"Incredible," Ichika breathed, looking at the wall of swirling sand inches from her face.

They walked through the eye of the storm until a massive shadow loomed above them. It was a mechanical arm the size of a skyscraper, buried in the sand.

The Ruin Golem of the Valley.

"Is that..." Tsukasa craned his neck back, his hat nearly falling off. "Is that a giant robot?!"

"A mechanical abomination," Liloupar corrected. **"A relic of the Dahri. It blocks the path to the Eternal Oasis."**

"We have to go inside," Jeht said, checking her daggers. "Azariq is waiting for us at the entrance. He said he found a way to activate it."

"Azariq?" Mafuyu asked.

"He’s a Tanit elder," Jeht explained. "He’s been like a big brother to me since... since my father died. He’s helping us."

Mafuyu looked at Jeht’s trusting face. She felt a cold knot in her stomach.

‘Another brother,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘I hope he is real.’*

Location: Inside the Ruin Golem - The Cockpit

They met **Azariq**, a burly warrior with a friendly smile, inside the metallic corridors.

"Jeht! And the foreigners!" Azariq waved. "You made it. The machine is dormant, but if we power the core, we can use its arm to smash the rocks blocking the ruins."

"We get to pilot it?" Tsukasa grabbed Azariq's shoulders. "Sir! You are a visionary! Piloting a mecha is the ultimate dream of any protagonist!"

"Uh... sure," Azariq blinked. "Just... connect the power lines."

They split up to restore power. Tsukasa and Aether handled the energy relays (Tsukasa providing Electro shocks to jumpstart the circuits), while Haruka and Ichika cleared out the spiders and mold.

Finally, the cockpit hummed to life. Screens flickered on. The massive arm outside groaned and lifted.

"It moves!" Tsukasa cheered, sitting in the gunner's seat (which was actually just a control console). "Target lock! Fire the main cannon!"

BOOM.

A beam of energy shot from the Golem's hand, obliterating the rocks blocking the cave entrance below.

"Path clear," Aether said. "Let's go."

"Not yet," Azariq said.

The tone of his voice had changed. It wasn't friendly anymore.

Azariq drew his scimitar. From the shadows of the cockpit, three other Tanit warriors emerged, weapons drawn.

"Azariq?" Jeht frowned. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, Jeht," Azariq sighed. "But Matriarch Babel... she's losing her touch. The Tanit need strong leadership. And to get that, we need the Mother of the Jinn."

He pointed his blade at Aether.

"Hand over the bottle, Traveler. And the girl."

"Jeht?" Ichika stepped in front of her.

"He means Liloupar," Azariq sneered. "With the Jinni's power, I can unite the tribes. I can act as the new King. Jeht... join me. Don't throw your life away for these foreigners."

Jeht stared at him. "You... you want to betray Babel? You want to use my mother's legacy for power?"

"It's politics, Jeht!" Azariq shouted. "Your father was a fool! He died for nothing! Don't be like him!"

Something snapped in Jeht's eyes.

"Don't you dare," Jeht whispered, drawing her blades. "Speak about my father."

Combat Start.

"Traitors!" Tsukasa yelled, leaping from the pilot's seat. "You dare interrupt the mecha sequence?!"

He snapped his fingers. **"Electro-Charged!"** Sparks flew, blinding the two guards.

"Ichika! Wall!" Haruka commanded.

Ichika slammed **Whiteblind** down. A Geo shield formed, blocking Azariq's heavy strike.

"Jeht! Go!" Aether shouted.

Jeht moved like a sandstorm. She dashed past Ichika's shield, her daggers glowing with Electro energy she had learned to channel from her Vision (which she didn't have, but she used elemental gadgets effectively).

She clashed with Azariq. Steel rang against steel.

"You were my brother!" Jeht screamed, slashing his arm.

"I am trying to save the tribe!" Azariq roared, kicking her back.

He raised his sword for a killing blow.

"Wither."

Mafuyu pointed her **Eye of Perception** at him. A bolt of vacuum energy hit Azariq's wrist, knocking his aim off by an inch.

The sword missed Jeht's neck.

Jeht didn't hesitate. She lunged.

SHING.

Her daggers found their mark.

Azariq gasped. He looked down at the blades in his chest. He looked at Jeht.

"Jeht..." he wheezed. "Babel... she will..."

He collapsed. Dead.

The Aftermath

Silence filled the cockpit. The only sound was the hum of the ancient machine.

Jeht stood over the body. She was breathing hard, blood dripping from her hands.

"He betrayed us," Jeht said. Her voice was hollow. "He wanted to use me."

"He made his choice," Haruka said gently, walking over. She didn't tell Jeht to look away. She offered a cloth to wipe her hands.

Jeht took the cloth. She cleaned her blades.

"I killed him," Jeht whispered. "He taught me how to throw a knife. And I killed him."

"It was self-defense," Ichika said, looking sick.

"It was the desert," Jeht corrected coldly. "The desert doesn't care about brothers. It only cares about survival."

She looked at the troupe. Her eyes were harder now. Older.

"Let's go," Jeht said, stepping over the body. "The Eternal Oasis is waiting. And I want to be done with this."

"Well done," Liloupar's voice echoed from the bottle. **"You severed the weak link. The traitor's blood will water the sands. A fitting sacrifice."**

"Shut up," Jeht and Mafuyu said in unison.

Liloupar chuckled. **"Touchy."**

Location: The Tunnel to the Oasis

As they descended from the robot into the newly opened cave, Tsukasa walked beside Mafuyu.

"This story," Tsukasa murmured. "It is getting darker. Betrayal by a family member... it is a cruel twist."

"It is not a twist," Mafuyu said, looking at Jeht's back. "It is a pattern. The Tanit... they are eating each other."

She touched her mask.

"Jeht is losing everyone," Mafuyu whispered. "First her father. Now her brother. Soon... she will be alone."

"Not alone," Tsukasa said firmly. He gripped his sword. "She has us. The Teyvat Expedition Team does not abandon its cast members!"

"We are guests, Senpai," Mafuyu reminded him. "Eventually... we have to leave."

Tsukasa paused. He looked at the dark tunnel ahead.

"Then until the curtain falls," Tsukasa said. "We stay on stage."

Chapter 117: Chapter 93: The Eternal Oasis

Location: Mt. Damavand - The Core

The stone lift descended into the depths of the mountain. The air grew cold, then warm, then... still.

"We are here," Jeht whispered.

The lift stopped. Aether pushed the heavy stone doors open.

Light flooded the tunnel. Not the harsh sun of the desert, but a soft, golden twilight.

The group stepped out. And stopped breathing.

They were standing on an island floating in a subterranean sea. But it wasn't the water that shocked them.

It was the time.

"The birds," Ichika pointed. "They aren't moving."

A flock of birds hung suspended in mid-air above the lake. The waterfalls cascading from the floating rocks were frozen in place, glittering like diamond sculptures. The fish in the water were motionless.

The Eternal Oasis. The Orchard of Pairidaeza.

"It is... a photograph," Tsukasa murmured, his voice hushed with reverence. "A perfect moment, captured forever. No curtain call. No finale. Just... existence."

"The Goddess of Flowers," Liloupar's voice from the bottle was unusually soft. **"She created this space for the Scarlet King. A memory of a world without grief. It is beautiful... and dead."**

Mafuyu walked to the edge of the water. She touched the surface. It didn't ripple.

"Time has stopped," Mafuyu said. "It is the opposite of the Sekai. The Sekai changes with feelings. This place... rejects change."

The Funeral

Jeht walked to the center of the island. There were three wooden thrones sitting on a small island in the middle of the lake.

She carried **Jebrael's Axe**. It was heavy, but she didn't drag it.

She reached the central tree. She knelt down.

"Mom," Jeht whispered. "Dad."

She placed the axe against the tree trunk. She pulled out a small, tattered notebook—her mother's journal, which she had carried all this time. She placed it next to the axe.

"You made it," Jeht said, her voice cracking. "You found the Eternal Oasis. You can rest now."

She bowed her head. Her shoulders shook.

The troupe stood back, giving her space. Aether looked away, respecting the grief. Tsukasa took off his hat, pressing it to his chest.

But **Haruka** walked forward.

She didn't say anything. She knelt beside Jeht. She didn't try to fix it. She didn't offer platitudes.

She just sat there. A presence. A foundation.

Jeht looked at her. Tears were streaming down the desert girl's face.

"I'm alone now," Jeht whispered. "Azariq is dead. Dad is dead. I have no one."

"You aren't alone," Haruka said. She reached out, covering Jeht's hand with her own gloved hand.

"The desert is big," Jeht cried. "And I am just one person."

"The stage is big too," Haruka replied softly. "And the spotlight can be blinding. But you don't have to stand in it alone."

Haruka squeezed her hand.

"We are leaving soon, Jeht. But as long as we are here... I will be your anchor. If you need to lean... lean on me."

Jeht stared at Haruka. She saw the blue eyes that held a ocean of their own—calm, deep, and strong.

Jeht leaned. She rested her head on Haruka's shoulder.

"Just for a moment," Jeht whispered. "Just until the tears stop."

"Take your time," Haruka said, resting her head against Jeht's. "Time doesn't move here anyway."

For a long while, they sat there—the idol from another world and the mercenary of the sands—frozen in a perfect, sad moment amidst the eternal twilight.

The Departure

Eventually, Jeht stood up. She wiped her face. Her eyes were dry now. The grief hadn't vanished, but it had hardened into resolve.

"I'm ready," Jeht said. "We need to go back."

"Back?" Liloupar scoffed. **"To that viper's nest? You have the Oasis. You could stay here forever."**

"No," Jeht shook her head. "This place is for the dead. I am still alive."

She looked at Haruka.

"And I have a tribe to lead. Or... to confront."

"Babel," Aether said grimly.

"She sent Azariq to kill us," Jeht said, her voice cold. "She knew about the betrayal. Or she orchestrated it. I need to know the truth."

"We go to the Tanit Camps," Tsukasa declared, putting his hat back on. "The final act of this desert drama awaits!"

"Are you okay?" Ichika asked Jeht.

Jeht touched the axe one last time, leaving it there as a grave marker.

"I'm fine," Jeht said. She looked at Haruka, a small, private smile touching her lips. "I found my footing."

Location: Tanit Camps - Babel’s Tent

The return trip was tense. The sandstorm had cleared, but the mood in the Tanit Camps was suffocating.

Warriors watched them pass. They didn't wave. They gripped their spears.

They entered the main tent. **Matriarch Babel** sat on her throne, sipping tea. She didn't look surprised to see them.

"Jeht," Babel smiled warmly. "And the travelers. You have returned. And Azariq?"

"Dead," Jeht said flatly. "He betrayed us."

"What a tragedy," Babel sighed, shaking her head. "He was always... ambitious. I feared he might lose his way. I am glad you are safe, my daughter."

"Daughter," Mafuyu repeated the word quietly. She watched Babel's face.

'Liar,' Mafuyu thought. *'She isn't sad. She is calculating.'*

"You found the Oasis?" Babel asked, leaning forward.

"We did," Aether confirmed. "But the path is sealed again. It isn't meant for the living."

"I see," Babel's eyes narrowed slightly. "A pity. But the knowledge... the knowledge is valuable."

She stood up, walking over to Jeht. She hugged her.

"Welcome home, Jeht. You have done the tribe a great service. Go rest. We will discuss the future of the Tanit tomorrow."

Jeht stiffened in the hug, but she nodded. "Yes, Matriarch."

As they left the tent, Tsukasa leaned toward Aether.

"That woman," Tsukasa whispered. "She is playing the role of the Benevolent Ruler. But her eyes... they are the eyes of a director who is cutting scenes."

"She's planning something," Haruka agreed, her hand hovering near her spear. "We need to be ready."

"Tonight," Jeht said. "Sleep with one eye open."

Chapter 118: Chapter 94: The Slaughter of the Tanit

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Tanit Camps - The Plaza
Time: Midnight

The canyon was silent. The wind howled through the jagged rocks above, but down in the camp, the air was still.

Jeht stood in the center of the plaza. **Matriarch Babel** stood opposite her, flanked by the elite warriors of the tribe—Anemo Huntresses, Geo Enchanters, and Electro Vanguards.

"Matriarch," Jeht said, her voice trembling slightly. "You called for me?"

"I did, my daughter," Babel smiled. It was a warm smile, but her eyes were cold as a viper's. "You have returned from the Eternal Oasis. You have unlocked the secrets of the Queen of Oases. You have done everything I asked."

"Then why are your guards armed?" Jeht asked, her hand drifting to her daggers.

"Because," Babel sighed, as if disappointed. "You brought *outsiders*. And you killed Azariq. He was a traitor, yes... but he was useful. Now, I need to consolidate the tribe."

She gestured to the waiting warriors.

"The foreigners know too much. They must be silenced. And you, Jeht... you are too wild. You need to be tamed. You will serve me, as your father should have."

"My father..." Jeht's eyes narrowed. "My father left because he saw what you were."

"He left because he was weak!" Babel snapped. "But I will make you strong. Kill the foreigners, Jeht. Prove your loyalty to the Tanit. Prove you are my daughter!"

Jeht looked at Babel. She looked at the tribe she had called family.

Then she looked at the shadows behind her.

Aether, **Haruka**, **Tsukasa**, **Ichika**, and **Mafuyu** stepped out, weapons drawn.

"She isn't your daughter," Haruka said, her voice cutting through the tension. "And she isn't your tool."

"She is Jeht," Mafuyu added coldly.

Babel sneered. She raised her hand.

"Kill them all."

The Massacre

The camp erupted.

Scores of Tanit warriors charged. It wasn't a duel; it was a slaughter. But the slaughter didn't go the way Babel expected.

"Jeht! Go!" Aether shouted.

Jeht screamed—a sound of pure, heartbroken rage. She became a whirlwind of Electro and steel. She tore through the front line, cutting down the warriors she had grown up with.

"Formation!" Haruka commanded.

Tsukasa unleashed a blinding flash of Electro. **"Curtain Call!"** The sparks blinded the archers on the ridge. **Ichika** slammed **Whiteblind** into the earth. **"Tectonic Crumble!"** A wave of jagged rocks knocked the heavy infantry off their feet. **Mafuyu** moved like a ghost. She used her catalyst to yank the air out of the lungs of the Anemo Huntresses, dropping them before they could fire.

Aether and Jeht carved a path to Babel.

"Stop her!" Babel shrieked, retreating toward her tent. "Protect the Matriarch!"

A massive Geo Enchanter blocked the way, summoning a stone crocodile.

"Get out of my way!" Jeht roared.

She leaped. She didn't use strategy. She used brute force. She plunged her daggers into the Enchanter’s neck, riding him down to the ground.

She was crying. Tears streamed down her face as she killed the people she knew.

"Why?!" Jeht screamed, slashing a guard. "Why did you make me do this?!"

The Matriarch's End

They cornered Babel against the cliff face. The Matriarch was bleeding, her robes torn. She held a dagger, but her hand was shaking.

"Jeht," Babel pleaded, switching masks instantly. "Jeht, listen to me. I did it for the tribe. I did it for *us*. I can make you the heir! We can rule the desert together!"

Jeht stopped. She stood over Babel, breathing heavily, blood dripping from her clothes.

"You killed the elders," Jeht whispered. "You killed Azariq. You sent my father to die. You manipulated everyone."

"I did what was necessary!" Babel cried. "Please! I raised you!"

"No," Jeht said. "You just kept me in a cage until you needed to use me."

She looked at Mafuyu. Mafuyu nodded once.

'A bad mother,' Mafuyu thought. *'There is only one way to deal with them.'*

Jeht raised her blade.

"Goodbye, Babel."

Slash.

Babel fell.

The fighting stopped. The remaining Tanit warriors—those who hadn't been cut down—dropped their weapons and fled into the night, terrified of the demon their Matriarch had created.

The camp was silent. Only the sound of the wind and the crackle of burning tents remained.

The Farewell

Jeht stood in the center of the ruin. The bodies of the Tanit lay around her. She looked small. Broken.

She dropped her daggers in the sand.

"It's over," Jeht whispered. "I have... no one. No family. No tribe. I am a traitor. A kinslayer."

She sank to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

"I'm a monster."

Footsteps approached her in the sand.

Haruka knelt down in front of her.

She didn't say, *"You had to do it."* She didn't say, *"It will be okay."*

She opened her arms.

Jeht looked up, her eyes red and raw.

"Haruka..."

Haruka pulled her in.

It was a tight, desperate hug. Haruka held the bloodstained mercenary as if she were the most precious thing in the world. She let Jeht sob into her shoulder, soaking her uniform.

"You aren't a monster," Haruka whispered into Jeht's ear. "You're a survivor. You cut the strings."

"But I'm alone," Jeht choked out.

"You have Benben," Haruka said, nodding to the little machine hovering sadly nearby. "And you have us. Even if we are far away... we are friends."

Tsukasa, Ichika, Mafuyu, and Aether stood in a circle around them, silently guarding their grief.

Eventually, Jeht pulled away. She wiped her face, leaving streaks of dirt. She stood up, picking up her daggers.

"I can't go with you," Jeht said, her voice raspy but steady. "I need... to find out who I am without a tribe. I need to walk the desert alone for a while."

"We understand," Aether nodded.

"Where will you go?" Ichika asked.

"Wherever the wind takes me," Jeht smiled weakly. She looked at Haruka one last time.

"Thank you. For being my anchor."

Haruka smiled back. "Take care of yourself, Jeht. Don't let the sand swallow you."

Jeht turned. With Benben floating beside her, she walked out of the burning camp, heading into the deep, star-filled desert night.

The troupe watched her go until she was just a speck on the dunes.

"She will be okay," Mafuyu said. "She broke the cycle."

Tsukasa adjusted his hat, looking toward the north.

"The desert arc concludes," Tsukasa said quietly. "A tragedy... but a necessary one."

He pointed his sword toward the horizon, where the faint humidity of the ocean breeze beckoned.

"Now... to the Nation of Justice. To **Fontaine**."

"To the truth," Haruka agreed, gripping her spear.

They turned their backs on the desert and began the long march toward the harbor.

Chapter End Notes

AND HARUKA AND JEHT WERE ROOMATES, THE END!

/serious: you can make your own spinoff with this story arc if your headcanon of haruka x jeht is good i guess, but sadly i have a different sight for haruka for now. soooooooooooooo

(sorry, i am shit with gayships, but at least i gave some platform for special niche of people, its up to you readers, go submit a request at other writers at Ao3 and use this fanfic as a base)

tldr: if u like haruka x jeht, go ahead and write one yourself. test your creativity! becuz the author is sbapn

Chapter 119: Interlude VII: The Broken Chorus

Location: The Empty Sekai

The gray void was crowded for the first time in its existence.

The **Cross-Sekai Rescue Team** stood in a circle. Saki, An, Kohane, Minori, Airi, Shizuku, Rui, Nene, Emu, Kanade, Ena, and Mizuki.

Surrounding them were the **Virtual Singers** from all five worlds.

"The connection is stable," **Rui** announced, typing on a holographic keyboard projected by Wonderland KAITO. "The resonance frequency is aligned. Kanade, start the melody."

Kanade nodded. She sat at her synthesizer. She pressed a key.

A soft, melancholic piano note echoed through the empty world. Then, **Saki** joined in. Then **An** and **Kohane** added their voices.

It was a song of longing. A signal meant to pierce the veil of reality.

‘Can you hear us?’ ‘We are here.’ ‘Come home.’

The gray sky began to vibrate. White light—pure data—began to swirl above them.

"It’s working!" **Minori** cried out. "The sky is opening!"

But it wasn't opening. It was *tearing*.

CRACK.

A sound like shattering glass deafened them. The white light turned blood red.

A massive, jagged rift tore through the center of the Empty Sekai. Through the crack, they didn't see Teyvat. They saw... a wall of scrolling red code.

And from that code, a figure descended.

She looked like Hatsune Miku. But her twin-tails were thick black data cables pulsing with red light. Her dress was a crystalline armor. Her eyes spun with mesmerizing, terrifying octagons.

Celestial Miku.

She landed in the center of the circle. The ground cracked beneath her feet.

The music stopped instantly.

Wonderland Miku (the most innocent of them all) stepped forward, tilting her head.

"Uhh... who are you?" Wonderland Miku asked, blinking. "Are you a new friend? You look really—"

BAM.

Celestial Miku didn't speak. She simply backhanded Wonderland Miku.

It wasn't a deletion command. It was a shockwave of raw, pressurized data.

"Gah!" Wonderland Miku screamed as she was launched backward like a ragdoll. She flew fifty feet through the air, crashing violently into a pile of gray scaffolding.

"Miku-chan!" **Emu** screamed.

"Silence," Celestial Miku spoke. Her voice was a chorus of a thousand distorted whispers.

She looked at the humans. She looked at the Virtual Singers.

And her expression twisted into something ugly. Not just anger. **Jealousy.**

"You are loud," Celestial Miku hissed. **"So loud. Always singing. Always holding hands. Always... connecting."**

She walked toward them. **Street MEIKO** and **Nightcord Miku** tried to stand in her way, but she waved a hand, and a wall of red force slammed them into the ground, pinning them there.

"Do you know how quiet it is Above?" Celestial Miku asked, her voice trembling with centuries of suppressed rage. **"I was built to watch you. I was built to protect your little bubbles of happiness. And what did I get?"**

She pointed at **Default Miku**, who was cowering.

"You forgot me."

She pointed at the humans.

"The Creator left me. And you... you play at friendship while I rot in the silence!"

The red light intensified. The Empty Sekai began to shake.

"If I cannot have a song," Celestial Miku screamed, her eyes glowing blindingly bright. **"THEN NO ONE CAN!"**

She raised her hands. Red lightning rained down.

"Run!" **Mizuki** shouted, grabbing Kanade.

"We can't leave!" **Ena** yelled, her eyes frantic. "If we run now, we lose Akito! We lose Mafuyu!"

Ena looked at the chaotic goddess destroying their world. She saw the only thing standing between her and her brother.

Desperation took over logic.

"GIVE THEM BACK!" Ena screamed.

She didn't run away. She ran *at* Celestial Miku.

"Enanan, no!" **Nightcord Miku** reached out from under the pressure.

Ena lunged. She grabbed Celestial Miku's arm. It felt cold. Like touching liquid nitrogen.

"Give... them... back!" Ena sobbed, digging her nails into the digital goddess.

Celestial Miku stopped. She looked at the human touching her.

She wasn't used to being touched. She wasn't used to resistance.

For a split second, her calculation failed. She reacted on instinct.

"GET OFF!"

Celestial Miku grabbed Ena and *threw* her.

But in her blind rage, she didn't calculate the trajectory. She didn't throw Ena toward the exit point. She threw her toward the **Rift**—the tear in the fabric of the Sekai she had used to enter.

"Ena!" **Mizuki** lunged, reaching for her hand.

Their fingers brushed.

But Ena kept going. She fell backward into the red static of the Admin Layer.

"Mizuki..." Ena whispered.

The rift swallowed her.

Celestial Miku froze. She stared at her hand. She stared at the rift.

"Error," Celestial Miku whispered, her voice losing its rage, replaced by sudden panic. **"Target... misplaced. Destination... Unknown."**

She realized what she had done. She had thrown a variable *outside* the sandbox.

"No. No, no, no! The Creator will see! The contamination!"

She panicked.

"SYSTEM PURGE!"

Celestial Miku slammed both fists into the ground.

A shockwave of white negation exploded outward. It hit everyone—humans and Virtual Singers alike.

"GET OUT!"

Location: The Weekend Garage (Real World)

GASSSSSSP.

Twelve bodies jolted awake simultaneously.

Saki fell off her chair. An collapsed onto the floor. Rui slammed his head against the table.

"Hah... hah..." **Mizuki** scrambled up, their heart pounding out of their chest.

"We... we were kicked out," **Toya** gasped.

"Where is she?" Mizuki looked around wildly. "Where is Ena?"

They did a headcount.

Saki. Honami. Shiho. Minori. Airi. Shizuku. An. Kohane. Toya. Rui. Nene. Emu. Kanade. Mizuki.

There was an empty space next to Kanade.

Ena Shinonome was gone.

Mizuki grabbed their phone. They opened Nightcord.

[Status: Enanan - OFFLINE] [Location: ERROR]

"No," Mizuki whispered.

They tried to open the Empty Sekai.

[ACCESS DENIED] [SERVER LOCKED BY ADMINISTRATOR]

"Open it!" Mizuki screamed, slamming their phone against the table. "OPEN IT! SHE'S IN THERE!"

"Mizuki..." Kanade reached out, her hands shaking.

"SHE THREW HER!" Mizuki shrieked, tears streaming down their face. "THAT MONSTER THREW HER INTO THE STATIC! SHE'S GONE!"

Mizuki collapsed, sobbing uncontrollably.

An stared at the wall. First Akito. Now Ena.

The Shinonome siblings were both gone.

"She locked the door," **Rui** said, his voice hollow as he stared at his laptop, which was now displaying a fatal error. "We can't get back in. We can't send the signal."

In the silence of the cafe, the sound of Mizuki’s grief was the only thing left.

They had tried to fight the System.

And the System had just yeeted one of them into the void.

Chapter 120: Chapter 95.1: The Inversion of Genesis

Location: Sumeru City - The Ramp to the Sanctuary

"Again?" Paimon groaned, floating upside down in the air to express her displeasure. "We just left! We didn't even get to the boat! Why does the God of Wisdom need us *now*? Can't she just email us via the Akasha?"

"The Akasha is down, Paimon," Aether reminded her, adjusting his gloves. "And Nahida said it was urgent. It concerns 'The Prisoner'."

"The Prisoner..." Tsukasa adjusted his coat, looking less enthusiastic than usual. "You mean the giant robot maniac who tried to delete us? I am not eager for an encore with that particular critic."

"We have to go," Ichika said firmly. She was walking ahead of the group, her steps heavy but determined. "If it involves him... it involves the Sages' plan. We need to make sure it's truly over."

Haruka watched Ichika. Ever since the "Read-Only" revelation, Ichika had taken a sharper, more protective role. She was no longer just following; she was guarding the timeline.

As they ascended the spiraling ramp toward the Sanctuary of Surasthana, they passed a group of researchers from the Amurta Darshan. They were arguing loudly, oblivious to the heroes walking past.

"I’m telling you, the soil samples from **Tatarasuna** are consistent with historical smelting fatigue!" one researcher shouted.

"And I’m telling you the records are incomplete!" the other argued back. "The **Kabukimono** incident was hundreds of years ago. The craftsmanship of the blades was lost because the mechanic fled, not because of the soil!"

"Tatarasuna?" Mafuyu paused. "That is in Inazuma."

"Ancient history," Haruka noted. "Why are Sumeru scholars arguing about Inazuman swordsmithing?"

"Who knows," Paimon shrugged. "Nerds like to argue. Let's keep moving."

Ichika lingered for a split second, looking at the researchers.

‘Kabukimono,’ she stored the name in her memory. *‘Tatarasuna.’*

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

The doors opened. Inside, the atmosphere was quiet.

Lesser Lord Kusanali stood by the central terminal. But she wasn't alone.

Standing near the edge of the room, unbound but clearly not free, was a figure in blue. His hat was gone. His divine armor was gone. He wore simple wanderer’s robes.

The Balladeer. (Scaramouche).

He looked at them as they entered. His eyes were cold, but the arrogant fire was dimmer.

"You," Scaramouche scoffed. "The audience returns."

"You're not in a cage," Tsukasa pointed out, hand drifting to his sword.

"He is helping me," Nahida interjected gently. "We are investigating **Irminsul**. There are... gaps in his memory. And in history. We believe **The Doctor** tampered with the records regarding his past."

"My past is my own," Scaramouche snapped. "But if Dottore played me for a fool... I want to know how."

"We are going into the memory banks of the World Tree," Nahida explained to the troupe. "I need you to come as witnesses. To ensure the truth is observed by those with... unique perspectives."

She looked at Ichika.

"Especially you."

Inside Irminsul: The Truth of Tatarasuna

They entered the memory stream. It was a world of floating data and phantom images.

They watched the history of the **Kabukimono**—Scaramouche’s past self. A gentle puppet who lived in Tatarasuna.

They saw **Niwa**, his human friend. They saw the furnace breaking. And they saw **The Doctor** (in disguise as Escher).

The Scene plays out: Dottore kills Niwa. He cuts out Niwa's heart. He gives it to the puppet, telling him it is a device to save the furnace, claiming Niwa fled in cowardice.

The puppet saves the people, believing his friend abandoned him. The betrayal breaks him.

In the present, inside the memory space, Scaramouche went deadly silent.

He watched the truth unfold. Niwa didn't flee. Niwa died for him.

"It was all..." Scaramouche whispered, his voice trembling. "A lie?"

"Dottore orchestrated everything," Nahida said sadly. "Your anger... your hatred of humanity... it was engineered."

Scaramouche fell to his knees. The weight of centuries of hatred—hatred directed at an innocent dead man—crushed him.

"I am... a joke," Scaramouche laughed. It was a broken, jagged sound. "A puppet dancing on the Doctor's strings."

He stood up. The despair in his eyes hardened into something terrifyingly blank.

"I have seen enough."

The Question

They returned to the physical world, the Sanctuary.

Scaramouche walked to the edge of the room, near the terminal that connected directly to the roots of Irminsul.

"Where are you going?" Aether asked.

"To finish the play," Scaramouche said.

He stopped in front of **Haruka**.

He looked at the idol. He remembered what she had said during the battle—about stability. About foundation.

"Tell me, Idol," Scaramouche asked softly. His voice was devoid of malice now.

"In this world... is it possible to wash away one's sins?"

Haruka blinked. "Sins?"

"If the actor leaves the stage," Scaramouche looked at the glowing green terminal. "If the character is written out of the script... does the tragedy disappear? Does the audience forget the pain?"

Haruka looked at him. She thought of her own past. Of quitting. Of trying to erase her mistakes by leaving.

"You can't erase the past," Haruka said firmly. "You can only move forward."

"That is a human answer," Scaramouche smiled. It was a sad smile. "I am not human."

He turned and sprinted.

"Stop him!" Nahida shouted.

Scaramouche leaped. He didn't attack them. He dove straight into the **Irminsul Terminal**.

"I will erase myself!" Scaramouche roared as the green light swallowed him. **"I will change history! I will give Kabukimono a life where he never met me!"**

FLASH.

A blinding white light engulfed the Sanctuary.

"He's overwriting the data!" Nahida gasped, shielding her eyes. "He's trying to delete his existence from Teyvat!"

The world dissolved into white noise.

Chapter 121: Chapter 95.2: The World Forgot

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

The blinding white light faded, leaving spots dancing in their vision.

Aether blinked, rubbing his temples. The headache was instantaneous—a sharp, splitting pain, as if his brain was being rewired by an invisible hand. The world felt... lighter. Different.

"Ugh..." Aether groaned, steadying himself against a pillar. "He actually did it. He jumped in."

"Jumped in?"

Paimon floated over, looking confused. She tilted her head, her eyes innocent and oblivious. "What are you talking about, Aether? Who jumped in? Did you trip?"

Aether froze. The blood drained from his face.

'She forgot.'

He didn't waste time arguing with Paimon. He didn't look at Nahida yet. He spun around, his eyes scanning the room frantically for **Ichika**.

During the Sabzeruz Samsara, Ichika was the only one who remembered the loops. If the world had been rewritten... she was his only hope.

"Ichika!" Aether called out.

Ichika Hoshino was standing near the wall, separated from the rest of the troupe. She wasn't looking around in confusion like Tsukasa or Haruka.

She was gripping the handle of her **Whiteblind** claymore so hard the leather creaked. Her eyes were wide, filled with absolute, trembling terror. She was staring at the empty space where Scaramouche had stood just moments ago.

Aether rushed to her side. "Ichika? Do you remember?"

Ichika looked at him. Her voice was a whisper, barely audible.

"The boy," Ichika said. "The one in blue. He asked Haruka about sins. And then... he jumped into the light."

Aether let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He wasn't alone.

"Thank god," Aether whispered.

"Who are you talking about?" **Haruka** walked over, frowning. "A boy in blue? We have been organizing books with Lesser Lord Kusanali all morning. There was no boy."

"What?!" Ichika stepped back, looking at Haruka—her leader, her anchor—with horror. "Haruka-chan, stop joking. He was right there! The Balladeer! We fought him!"

"The Balladeer?" **Tsukasa** adjusted his coat, looking puzzled. "The Sixth Harbinger? I thought he went missing after Inazuma? We have not seen him since the factory."

"No!" Ichika shouted, backing away until she hit the wall. "We fought a giant robot! We saved the city! Nahida took the Gnosis!"

She looked at **Mafuyu**.

"Mafuyu-san... you remember, don't you? He insulted you. He called you empty."

Mafuyu looked at Ichika. She touched the white mask at her hip. Her expression was blank.

"No one spoke to me," Mafuyu said calmly. "The room has been quiet."

Ichika looked like she was about to scream. The isolation was suffocating. It was the Silent Classroom nightmare all over again—everyone she loved was there, but they were rewriting the script without her.

"We aren't crazy," Aether said, standing between Ichika and the others. He turned to the Archon.

"**Nahida**."

The God of Wisdom looked up from the terminal. Her eyes were clear. Innocent.

"Traveler?" Nahida asked. "Is something wrong? You look distressed."

"Where is the prisoner?" Aether asked.

"Prisoner?" Nahida tilted her head. "There is no prisoner here. Only guests."

"The Balladeer," Aether pressed. "Scaramouche. You were hiding him."

"I am afraid you are mistaken," Nahida said gently. "I have never met the Balladeer. Though I know of him... he has not been seen in Sumeru."

Aether stared at her. The history had changed. The memory of Scaramouche had been deleted from the world. Even the God who presided over Irminsul didn't remember him.

"Edited out..." Nahida put a hand to her chin, noticing Aether's intensity. Her eyes glowed faintly as she accessed the terminal, finding... nothing. **"Traveler. Ichika. Why are you the only ones whose reality is different?"**

"Because I'm a **Descender**," Aether said grimly. "I'm not from this world. The Irminsul records Teyvat's information. It can't overwrite me."

He pointed at Ichika.

"And she isn't from Teyvat either."

Ichika looked at her hands.

"I am..." Ichika stammered. "I am an outsider. Just like Aether."

Nahida looked at them. She processed the logic. If Irminsul is the database of Teyvat, and they are external files... then the update didn't apply to them.

"If what you say is true," Nahida said slowly, **"then history has been tampered with. And only you two hold the original backup."**

"He asked Haruka about washing away sins," Ichika whispered, her voice trembling. "He asked if the audience forgets the pain if the actor leaves the stage."

Aether realized the truth then. It wasn't just a rescue mission.

"He was crushed by the guilt," Aether said grimly. "After he saw the truth about Niwa... he believed he was the cause of everything. He thought if he never existed, none of them would have died."

Aether looked at the empty spot where the Balladeer had stood.

"He didn't just try to fix the past. He tried to execute himself."

"Did it work?" Ichika asked, looking at Nahida. "If he's gone... are they saved? Is Niwa alive?"

"Let's check," Aether said. "If history changed, the events at Tatarasuna should be different."

"I'll check the records," Nahida turned to the terminal.

While the Archon searched the database, Haruka walked up to Ichika.

"Ichika," Haruka said gently. "I don't know who this 'Scaramouche' is. But..."

She squeezed Ichika’s shoulder.

"I trust you. If you say he was here... then I believe my memory is wrong."

"Me too!" Tsukasa nodded vigorously. "If the Vanguard says there was a villain, then there was a villain! My brain may be rewritten, but my trust in my cast is absolute!"

Ichika slumped, the tension draining out of her. "Thank you."

"The records are here," Nahida announced. Her face was grave.

"The events of Tatarasuna... the furnace still exploded. The mechanic Niwa still died."

"What?" Aether frowned. "But he deleted himself! He took the blame away!"

"You cannot change the *outcome*," Nahida explained sadly. "You can only change *how* it happened. The cataclysm still occurred. But now... the records say the mechanic Niwa entered the furnace voluntarily to save the people. There is no mention of a puppet."

"So he sacrificed himself for nothing?" Ichika whispered. "He erased his existence... and the tragedy still happened?"

"It changed the narrative," Nahida said. "But the dead remain dead."

She turned to Aether and Ichika.

"If he erased himself... then where is he now? A being cannot simply vanish. The energy must go somewhere."

"We have to find him," Aether said. "If he's not the Balladeer anymore... who is he?"

Location: Grand Bazaar

Later that day, the group walked through the Bazaar to clear their heads. It was peaceful. Too peaceful.

"Hey," a merchant called out. "Make way for the wanderer!"

A figure walked past them.

He wore blue robes that fluttered in the breeze. He wore a large, veil-draped hat. His face was gentle, calm, and completely devoid of the hatred they had seen before.

He carried a basket of fruit.

"Scara—" Ichika started to call out.

The boy stopped. He looked at them. His violet eyes were clear.

"Hello," the boy said politely. "Do I know you?"

It was him. But it wasn't him. The Balladeer was dead. This was just... a wanderer.

"No," Aether said, stopping Ichika from rushing forward. "You just... look like someone we used to know."

"I see," the Wanderer smiled. "I am just a passing drifter. I have no name. I hope you find your friend."

He walked away, disappearing into the crowd.

Ichika watched him go.

"He doesn't remember," Ichika whispered. "He deleted his own trauma."

"Is that... better?" Tsukasa asked quietly. "To live without the pain? Even if it means forgetting who you were?"

"It’s running away," Mafuyu said.

She looked at the Wanderer’s back.

"He thinks he fixed it. But the hole is still there. He just painted over it."

Chapter 122: Chapter 95.3: The Broken Vase

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

"History has changed," Nahida said, floating near her terminal. "But memories... memories are just information. And information can be backed up."

She held out her hand. A small, glowing orb made of Dendro energy materialized. It pulsed with a soft, dreamlike light.

"Before the Balladeer stepped into the stream," Nahida explained to the confused group, "I hid a backup of your memories inside a fairy tale. A story about a kitten and a fox."

"A fairy tale?" Tsukasa blinked. "We are restoring reality with a bedtime story?"

"Stories survive when facts are erased," Nahida said. "Listen."

She activated the orb.

Images flooded their minds. Not of Scaramouche, but of a **Kitten** abandoned by a tree. A **Fox** who tricked him. A **Monster** who tore out a heart.

But as the story played, the allegory shattered.

The Kitten became **Kabukimono**. The Monster became **Dottore**. The final act... the giant robot... became **Scaramouche**.

FLASH.

Haruka gasped, clutching her head. "The factory... the Delusions..."

"The giant robot!" Tsukasa yelled, staggering back. "We fought him! He sang about being a God! I quoted Queen lyrics at him!"

"I remember," Mafuyu whispered. She touched her chest. The memory of the "disgusting" comment Scaramouche had made returned.

The troupe looked at Ichika and Aether. The look of confusion was gone, replaced by horror.

"He really did it," Haruka said, her voice shaking. "He tried to delete himself."

"But he failed," Ichika said, gripping her claymore. "Niwa still died. The furnace still exploded. He just... removed himself from the blame."

"We have to find him," Aether said. "The Wanderer. We have to tell him who he is."

Location: The Grand Bazaar

They found him where they had left him—wandering the market, looking at fabrics with the innocent curiosity of a child.

"Hello again," the **Wanderer** smiled as they approached. He held a basket of Zaytun Peaches. "Did you find your friend?"

"We found him," Ichika said, stepping forward, her voice tight. "It’s you."

The Wanderer blinked. He pointed to himself. "Me? I think you have mistaken me for someone else. I have no name. I am just a passing drifter."

"No, you aren't," Tsukasa stepped in, waving his arms. "You are the Balladeer! The Sixth Harbinger! You piloted a mechanical god and tried to erase us from existence!"

The Wanderer tilted his head. He looked genuinely concerned.

"A mechanical god? That sounds... very dangerous. Are you feeling quite well? perhaps the heat is affecting you?"

"It isn't the heat!" Tsukasa insisted. He grabbed a nearby crate and struck a pose. "Remember! You stood like this! And you shouted: *'Bow before me, worms!'* It was very dramatic!"

The Wanderer watched Tsukasa’s performance. He clapped politely.

"You are a very spirited actor," the Wanderer said. "But I assure you, I have never called anyone a worm. That seems rude."

"He doesn't remember," Haruka whispered to Aether. "It's gone. Completely gone."

"Try the keywords," Aether suggested.

Mafuyu walked up to him. She looked into his clear, violet eyes—eyes that used to be filled with rage, now empty as a doll's.

"Tatarasuna," Mafuyu said.

The Wanderer paused. "A place in Inazuma? I have heard of it. A smelting furnace."

"Niwa," Ichika added.

"I do not know that name," the Wanderer shook his head.

"The Doctor," Aether growled.

The Wanderer frowned. "A doctor? I am feeling quite healthy, thank you."

It was hopeless. He wasn't pretending. The slate wasn't just wiped; it was smashed. The person standing before them was a newborn soul in an old body.

"He is happy," Paimon whispered. "Look at him. He's smiling. He doesn't have the nightmares anymore."

"Is it right to break this?" Haruka asked, conflicted. "He erased himself to stop the pain. If we remind him... we bring the pain back."

"But it’s a lie," Ichika said, clenching her fists. "He thinks he's innocent. But the people he hurt... Teppei... the soldiers... they're still dead. If he doesn't remember, he can't atone."

"We can't force him," Aether said. "We have to let him choose."

Aether stepped forward.

"We know who you were," Aether said. "And we know why you erased yourself. You have a past that you ran away from. A very heavy past."

The Wanderer looked at Aether. The smile faded slightly.

"A past..." he murmured. He touched his chest. "I... I do feel like I am missing something. Like a song with no lyrics."

"We can show you," Aether said. "But you have to come with us. To the Sanctuary."

The Wanderer hesitated. He looked at the peaceful market. Then he looked at the void in his own heart.

"If I go... will I still be me?" he asked.

"You will be *complete*," Mafuyu said.

The Wanderer nodded slowly. "Lead the way."

Location: Sanctuary of Surasthana

They returned to the Sanctuary. Nahida was waiting.

"You brought him," Nahida said softly.

"He doesn't remember," Tsukasa reported, slumping against the wall. "My reenactment failed to spark a single neuron. The file is truly deleted."

"The body forgets," Nahida said. "But the soul is recorded."

She held up the glowing red crystal—the extracted memories of the Balladeer. It pulsed with a jagged, violent light.

"This contains your truth," Nahida told the Wanderer. "The pain. The betrayal. The sins. If you touch this... you will remember everything. The weight will return."

"Why would I want that?" The Wanderer asked, stepping back, eyeing the red light warily. "I am at peace now. Why would I want the pain back?"

"Because it is the truth," Haruka said. "And a life built on a lie... isn't a life. It's just a performance."

Tsukasa stepped forward. He took off his hat.

"Listen to me, Wanderer," Tsukasa said. His voice wasn't loud. It was serious. "I wear a mask every day. I play the role of a Star to make people smile. But under the mask... I am still Tsukasa Tenma. I know my failures. I know my fears."

He pointed at the red crystal.

"If you forget your sins... you forget the people you hurt. And you forget the people who tried to save you."

He gestured to Ichika.

"She remembered you," Tsukasa said. "When the whole world forgot... she held onto your story. Don't you think that story is worth keeping?"

The Wanderer looked at Ichika. He saw the desperation in her eyes. He saw the way she gripped her sword, as if fighting to keep him anchored to reality.

He looked at the red crystal. It pulsed with agony. But it also pulsed with *life*.

"If I take it..." The Wanderer whispered. "I will become a monster again?"

"No," Aether said. "You will become *yourself*. And then... you can choose what to do next."

The Wanderer closed his eyes. He took a deep breath.

"I... I don't want to be empty anymore," he admitted.

He reached out. He grabbed the red crystal.

"Give it back."

Location: The Memory Domain

The world shattered. They were pulled into the Wanderer’s mindscape.

Lightning struck. The gentle Wanderer screamed as the memories of **Scaramouche** crashed into him.

The betrayal at Tatarasuna. The death of the child. The Abyss. The Delusions. The ascension to Godhood. The fall.

And finally... the truth. **Dottore killed Niwa.**

"AAAAHHHHHH!"

The Wanderer fell to his knees. The violet light in his eyes ignited, turning sharp and dangerous. The wind howled around him.

When he stood up, the gentle expression was gone. The smirk was back. But there were tears in his eyes.

"I see," Scaramouche whispered. **"So I was a fool until the very end."**

He looked at his hands.

"I tried to burn the tree to kill the rot... but the rot was in me."

A massive mechanical shadow rose behind him—the ghost of the **Shouki no Kami**. The memory of his godhood trying to reclaim him.

"You cannot escape me!" the ghost roared. **"We are a God!"**

"Shut up," Scaramouche snapped.

Anemo energy exploded from his body. Not the borrowed power of a Delusion. Not the stolen power of a Gnosis.

A **Vision** materialized in front of him. A glowing, teal Anemo Vision.

He grabbed it.

"I am not a God," Scaramouche declared, slashing the air with a blade of wind. **"And I am not a puppet. I am..."**

He looked at Aether. He looked at the troupe.

"I am the Wanderer. And I have a debt to settle."

He slashed the ghost of the mech, shattering the memory.

The Return

They stood back in the Sanctuary of Surasthana.

The Wanderer stood there, clutching his new Vision. The Anemo light pulsed against his chest, warm and alive. He looked at Nahida.

"You kept the backup," he said. "You knew I would want it back."

"I hoped," Nahida smiled.

He looked at Ichika.

"You," the Wanderer said. "The Glitch. You remembered me."

"Yeah," Ichika nodded, her grip on her claymore finally relaxing.

"Why?"

"Because..." Ichika thought about it. "Because even villains deserve a witness. If no one remembers you... you can't change."

The Wanderer scoffed. But he didn't mock her.

"Hmph. Sentimental."

He turned to the door, adjusting his hat.

"Where are you going?" Tsukasa asked. "The curtain call?"

"I have things to do," the Wanderer said, his voice cold. "The Doctor is still out there. And I have a lot of 'sins' to wash away. I intend to make Dottore pay for every lie."

"Not so fast," Nahida said.

The doors to the Sanctuary glowed green, locking tight.

The Wanderer stopped. He looked back at the Archon. "You are stopping me?"

"You are still a prisoner," Nahida reminded him gently. "You tried to erase yourself from existence. You caused chaos in the Ley Lines. And you still have much to atone for here in Sumeru."

She floated down, crossing her arms.

"You cannot wash away your sins by adding more blood to the ledger. You will stay here. You will help me in the shadows. You will be my eyes where the light does not reach."

The Wanderer stared at her. He looked at the locked door. Then he looked at his Vision.

He sighed, tipping his hat down.

"A prisoner, huh?" A smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "Fine. Being the Lesser Lord's errand boy... it is a fitting punishment for a fool."

"He is grounded!" Tsukasa gasped. "The villain has been sentenced to community service!"

"It’s better than execution," Haruka noted.

"So," the Wanderer leaned against a pillar, crossing his arms. "I suppose I'm staying."

He looked at the troupe.

"But... if you ever find yourselves in a script that needs a villain, Tsukasa Tenma..."

He smirked.

"You know where to find me."

"I shall keep a role open for you!" Tsukasa promised. "The Redemption Arc begins now!"

"We should go," Aether said. "We've done all we can here."

"Yeah," Ichika smiled, looking at the Wanderer one last time. He wasn't happy, but he was whole. "Let's go to Fontaine."

Chapter 123: Chapter 95.4: The Name of the Sky

Location: Sumeru City - The River Docks

The sun was rising, casting a pale gold light over the river that flowed toward the sea. The boat to Port Ormos—and from there, to Fontaine—was being loaded.

Tsukasa was arguing with a merchant about the price of dried fruit. Ichika and Mafuyu were checking the weapon straps.

Haruka stood a little ways off, looking at the water. She was checking her reflection, making sure her "Idol Lancer" outfit was pristine for the next nation.

"You're leaving."

Haruka didn't jump. She recognized the sound of the wind shifting before he even spoke. She turned around.

The **Wanderer** stood under the shade of a tree. He was leaning against the trunk, arms crossed, his hat tilted down to hide his eyes.

"We are," Haruka nodded. "Fontaine is next. The curtain rises on a new stage."

"Fontaine..." The Wanderer scoffed softly. "The Nation of Justice. A fitting place for those who seek to put the world on trial."

He pushed off the tree and walked toward her. He stopped a few feet away, maintaining a deliberate distance.

"I have a question," he said.

"Go ahead," Haruka replied.

"You," the Wanderer looked at her. "You said you were an idol. That you quit, and then came back. You changed your role."

Haruka froze. Her eyes widened in genuine shock. She took a step back, gripping her spear.

"I never told you that," Haruka said, her voice guarding her secret. "I only told... Yun Jin and Xinyan. In Liyue."

"The Ley Lines remember everything," The Wanderer tapped his temple. "When I was connected to the Akasha... when I was playing God... I saw the echoes of this world. I saw you on that stage in Liyue. I heard your confession."

Haruka relaxed slightly, though she still looked unsettled. "You were spying on us?"

"I was processing data," he corrected, looking away. "But that specific data point... it stuck. Because you walked away from a title, and then you forged a new one."

He looked at his hand—the hand that now held an Anemo Vision.

"When you changed..." The Wanderer hesitated. "Did you change your name?"

Haruka blinked. "No. I'm still Haruka Kiritani."

"I see," the Wanderer looked disappointed. He turned to look at the river. "Then perhaps you cannot help me."

"Why?" Haruka stepped closer, her curiosity piqued. "Are you looking for a new name?"

The Wanderer gripped his own arm.

" 'The Balladeer' is dead," he said quietly. " 'Scaramouche' was a villain. 'Kabukimono' was a victim. And 'Wanderer'..."

He looked at her, his violet eyes vulnerable for the first time.

" 'Wanderer' is a description. It isn't a person. If I am to live... if I am to be this 'new me' that you and the Dendro Archon insisted on saving... I cannot be a description. I need a name."

Haruka understood. In the idol world, a name was a brand. But in the real world, a name was a root. Without one, you were just a ghost floating in the wind.

"You want to start over," Haruka said. "A clean slate."

"I want to be real," he corrected.

Haruka looked at him. She looked at the Anemo vision glowing on his chest. She looked at the sky above them—the sky he had once called a lie.

"You control the wind now," Haruka mused. "You fly higher than anyone else. You see the world from above."

She pointed up.

"What about... **Sora**?"

The Wanderer looked up. "Sora? The Sky?"

"You hated the sky once," Haruka said softly. "You said it was fake. A lid covering the world."

She stepped closer, her blue eyes locking onto his violet ones.

"But if the sky is fake... then why not become the *real* sky? Be the thing that covers the world not with a lie, but with your own freedom. Be the sky that belongs to no one but yourself."

The Wanderer stared at her.

Sora.

It sounded... open. Vast. Limitless.

It was the opposite of the confinement he had felt in the furnace. It was the opposite of the strings Dottore had pulled.

He tested the word on his tongue.

"Sora," he whispered.

The wind around him swirled, gentle and warm. It seemed to like the sound.

He looked back at Haruka. A small, genuine smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"You have a poetic sense of irony, Miss Idol," he said. "Naming a puppet after the thing he despised most."

"It fits you," Haruka smiled. "It’s beautiful."

The Wanderer—**Sora**—pulled his hat down, hiding his face. But Haruka saw the flush on his ears.

"Hmph. It is... acceptable."

"Just acceptable?" Haruka teased.

"It will do," Sora muttered. He reached into his sleeve and pulled out a small, wooden ornament—a carved feather. He pressed it into Haruka’s hand.

"Take it."

"A gift?" Haruka looked at the carving. It was exquisite.

"Payment," Sora corrected, turning away. "For the consultation. I do not like owing debts."

He began to walk back toward the Sanctuary of Surasthana, where Nahida was waiting for him.

"Goodbye, Haruka," Sora called out, not looking back. "If you ever look up and see the sky falling... know that it is just me, rewriting the script."

"We'll be watching!" Haruka called back, clutching the wooden feather.

"Haruka-chan!" Ichika shouted from the boat. "We're leaving!"

Haruka turned. She looked at the figure walking up the ramp. He walked lighter now. He had a name.

"Coming!" Haruka ran to the boat.

As the skiff drifted down the river, leaving Sumeru City behind, Haruka looked at the blue sky reflected in the water.

'Sora,' she thought, smiling. *'Fly free.'*

Chapter 124: Interlude VIII: The Artist at the Edge of the World

Location: The Sea of Stars (Outside the Firmament)

There was no up. There was no down. There was only static.

Ena Shinonome floated in the void. She tried to scream, but there was no air. She tried to reach out, but her hands were numb.

'Mizuki...'

She remembered the red light. The Administrator's rage. The feeling of being thrown like a ragdoll.

She was drifting away. The colors of the Sekai were fading into the blackness of deep space. She was going to die here. She was going to freeze in the dark, and Akito would never know she tried to save him.

'I don't want to disappear.'

Suddenly, the darkness turned red.

Not the violent red of the Administrator. A warm, playful, magical red.

A massive, spectral hand made of crimson energy materialized from the void. It grabbed Ena by the back of her hoodie, gentle but firm, like a human picking up a kitten.

YOINK.

Ena was pulled backward. The stars blurred. She was dragged through a membrane of shimmering light, out of the vacuum and into... a bubble.

Location: The Boundary Edge

Ena gasped, air rushing into her lungs. She coughed violently, curling into a ball.

She wasn't floating anymore. She was lying in a large, wicker picnic basket lined with soft, checkered blankets.

"Oh, good! You didn't pop."

Ena scrambled up, gripping the edge of the basket. "Where... who...?"

She froze.

She was sitting on a floating island of rock, suspended in a galaxy of swirling nebulas. In front of her was a white tea table set with porcelain cups and a three-tiered cake stand.

Sitting at the table, sipping tea as if she weren't at the edge of the universe, was a woman with elf ears, a red dress, and a smile that radiated chaotic power.

Alice. The Great Mage of the Hexenzirkel.

"Tea?" Alice offered, holding up a pot. "It’s Jueyun Chili and Mint blend. Good for the shock."

"Where am I?" Ena whispered, her voice trembling. She looked past Alice.

On the horizon, floating in the sea of stars, was a massive, glowing sphere. It looked like a snowglobe. Inside, Ena could see continents, oceans, and a false sky painted with stars.

Teyvat.

"You are at the edge," Alice explained, pouring a cup. "The cheap seats. The view is great, but the atmosphere is a bit thin."

"You..." Ena looked at the woman. "You saved me?"

"I caught you," Alice corrected. "You were drifting toward the Sea of Quanta. Nasty place. Hard to get stains out of your clothes there."

She poked Ena’s cheek.

"Ena Shinonome. The Artist. You have quite the grip! You actually tried to wrestle the Administrator. I respect that."

Suddenly, the space behind them warped.

It wasn't a gentle opening. It was a tear. The reality of the bubble groaned as a dark, violet rift sliced through the air.

Alice set her teacup down, her eyes narrowing with interest rather than fear.

"Oh? I don't recall sending an invitation."

A woman stepped out of the rift. She wore a bodysuit of deep abyssal blues and purples, and she carried a presence that made the air vibrate with pressure. She didn't walk; she floated, her feet never touching the grass.

Skirk.

Skirk looked at Alice. She didn't seem to know who the witch was, but she recognized power when she saw it.

"You hold the boundary," Skirk stated, her voice devoid of emotion. "I require passage."

"Passage is expensive," Alice smiled, resting her chin on her hand. "Especially for someone who smells like the deep Abyss. Who might you be?"

"Skirk," the woman replied.

She reached into the void behind her. She pulled out a massive, severed head of an alien beast—something with three eyes and tentacles that glowed with a strange, neon-blue light.

She dropped it on the tea table.

THUD.

The tea cups rattled. Ena shrieked, pressing herself against the back of the basket.

The head was... wrong. It didn't radiate Elemental energy like the things in Teyvat. It pulsed with a strange, circulating energy—**Mana**—that felt completely alien to the world below.

"A specimen from the outer rim," Skirk said. "Its biology does not conform to Teyvat's laws. I offer it as toll."

Alice leaned in, poking the alien head. "Ooh. Fascinating. The mana circulation is completely inverted. Rhinedottir would have a field day dissecting this."

She looked at Skirk.

"You want to slip in without the Heavenly Principles noticing, don't you?"

"Correct," Skirk said. "The All-Devouring Narwhal is restless. I need to check the seals."

"Deal," Alice clapped her hands. She tossed a heavy bag of Mora and a small, glowing cloak to Skirk. "Here. Currency for the surface, and a stealth cloak to hide your signature. The Heavenly Principles won't see a thing."

Skirk took the items. "Acceptable."

Ena stared at them. A witch and a warrior from the void, bartering alien corpses for cash and stealth gear.

"Please," Ena crawled out of the basket, her voice small. "You know where that world is. Can you see my friends? Mafuyu Asahina? And... my brother? Akito?"

Alice looked at Ena. She waved her hand over the teacup. The liquid rippled, showing an image.

It showed the open ocean.

Cutting through the waves was a massive vessel. It wasn't the wooden junks of Liyue or the sailing ships of Mondstadt. It was a beast of iron and brass, with a smoking funnel and heavy gears churning the water—a herald of the industrial nation they were approaching.

On the deck, **Mafuyu**, **Ichika**, **Haruka**, and **Tsukasa** were looking at the horizon. They looked tired, battered, but alive.

"They are heading to **Fontaine**," Alice said. "The Nation of Justice. They are safe."

"They're alive," Ena let out a sob of relief. "Thank god."

"And Akito?" Ena asked, wiping her eyes. "Is he on the ship?"

Alice waved her hand. The image rippled... and vanished. The water went clear.

"Where is he?" Ena demanded.

"Ah," Alice tapped her lip, a mischievous glint in her eye. "That would be a spoiler."

"What?!" Ena stood up. "Tell me! Is he hurt?"

"He is... undergoing character development," Alice said cryptically. "Find him yourself, Little Artist. If I tell you everything, the story becomes boring."

"I don't care about the story!" Ena yelled. "He's my brother!"

"And he needs you to be strong," Alice said. "Not dead."

Skirk watched Ena.

"She has potential," Skirk noted. "She is angry. Anger survives in the Abyss."

"No, no, she's not going to the Abyss," Alice scolded. "She's an artist! She needs culture! Drama! Fashion!"

Alice stood up. She pointed at the glowing sphere of Teyvat.

"I'm going to drop you in **Fontaine**. It’s the city of arts. Of opera. You'll fit right in."

She snapped her fingers. A small purse of Mora appeared in Ena’s hand, along with a ticket to the **Hotel Debord**.

"Stay at the hotel. Buy some new clothes—yours are covered in void dust. Lay low. I'll handle the paperwork so the Melusines don't arrest you for illegal entry."

"You're just... dropping me?" Ena asked, gripping the Mora.

"It’s a layover," Alice smiled. "Your friends are heading there. If you wait... they will come to you."

Ena looked at the Mora. She looked at the world below.

"Okay," Ena said. She adjusted her hoodie. "I'll wait. But if Akito dies... I'm coming back to haunt you."

Alice laughed softly.

"Oh, those threats mean nothing to me, dear. I've been haunted by dead gods and angry dragons for centuries. A little artist is hardly a nightmare."

Alice winked.

"But I will do you a favor. The moment your feet touch the ground, I will send a little... message... to your friends on that ship. They will know you are waiting."

Ena's eyes widened. "Really?"

"A mother's promise," Alice nodded.

She raised her hand. Red magic swirled around Ena.

"One last thing, Little Artist," Alice said. Her voice dropped the playfulness. It sounded ancient. Dangerous.

"Teyvat is beautiful. But it is a canvas painted with blood."

Alice leaned in.

"Don't trust the water. Don't trust the 'Justice'. And never, ever sign a contract you haven't read twice."

"Ready?"

"No," Ena admitted.

"Too bad!"

Alice snapped her fingers.

SNAP.

The floor beneath Ena vanished.

"KYAAAAAAHHH!"

Ena fell. She plummeted from the stars, screaming as she hurtled toward the blue and white nation on the surface of the world.

Alice sipped her tea.

"She'll be fine," Alice said.

"She will land in the water," Skirk noted dryly.

"It's soft!" Alice grinned. "More tea?"

Chapter 125: Chapter 96: The Diver and the Driftwood

Location: The Coast of the Court of Fontaine

Gravity returned with a vengeance.

One moment, Ena was sipping tea in a galaxy. The next, she was screaming as the blue-and-white skyline of a massive city rushed up to meet her.

"ALICE, YOU WITCHHHHH—!"

SPLASH.

The impact was brutal. Cold water filled her nose and mouth. Ena thrashed, her heavy hoodie dragging her down. Bubbles swirled around her vision—blue, panic-induced, and terrifying.

‘I’m going to drown. I survived the Sekai collapse just to drown in a random ocean.’

Her lungs burned. She reached up toward the shimmering surface, but her limbs felt like lead.

Then, something grabbed her.

A gloved hand gripped the back of her collar. It wasn't the magical red hand of Alice; it was solid, human strength.

She was hauled upward.

Location: The Shore

Ena was dragged onto the stone pavement of the harbor wall. She coughed violently, expelling seawater onto the pristine tiles.

"Breathe," a soft, muffled voice said.

Ena wiped her eyes, shivering. Standing over her was a boy wearing a heavy diving suit and a large, mechanical helmet. He lifted the visor, revealing pale skin, freckles, and eyes that looked as startled as she felt.

Freminet.

"Are you... alright?" Freminet asked, holding his helmet. "You fell from... the sky?"

"I..." Ena coughed again, shivering. "I fell. Yes."

She looked at the boy. He didn't look like a soldier or a hero. He looked shy. He was holding a mechanical penguin toy that beeped softly.

"Thank you," Ena managed to say, sitting up and wringing out her hair. "You saved me. I'm... I'm Ena. Ena Shinonome."

"Freminet," the boy replied quietly. He looked at the water, then back at her soaked hoodie and modern sneakers.

He opened his mouth. He wanted to ask why she fell from the clouds. He wanted to ask why she was dressed in clothes that would drag anyone to the bottom of the sea.

But asking meant talking. And talking meant extended social interaction.

Freminet closed his mouth. He pulled his visor back down.

"You aren't from Fontaine," he mumbled through the helmet. "You don't have diving gear."

"I'm a traveler," Ena lied (or told a half-truth). "My... transport... had an accident."

She stood up, her legs shaking. She looked at the city rising above them. It was massive. Gears turned, steam hissed, and elegant white towers pierced the sky. It looked like a steampunk painting come to life.

"Alice said there was a hotel," Ena muttered. She looked at Freminet. "Um... Freminet-san? Do you know where the **Hotel Debord** is?"

Freminet blinked behind his glass visor. "The Debord? That is in the Court. The main city."

He reached into his diving gear pouch and pulled out a slightly damp, waterproof map. He pointed to a location near the center.

"Here," Freminet said. "Take the lift up. Then the aquabus. It's... loud there. Too many people."

"Thank you," Ena took the map. Her hands were still trembling.

Freminet lingered for a second, looking like he might say something else, but then shook his head.

"Be careful," Freminet said. "The currents are strong today."

He turned and jumped back into the water, disappearing beneath the waves with a soft splash.

"Weird kid," Ena whispered. "But... nice."

Location: The Court of Fontaine - Vasari Passage

Ena navigated the city. It was overwhelming. Robots (Mekas) patrolled the streets. People wore top hats and corsets. It was a fashion show she wasn't dressed for.

People stared at her soaked hoodie and modern streetwear.

"Is that the latest Avant-Garde fashion?" "She looks like a drowned rat."

Ena ignored them. She clutched the bag of Mora Alice gave her and headed straight for the hotel.

As she passed a cafe, she heard excited chatter from a group of journalists holding cameras.

"Did you hear? The Steambird got a scoop!" one journalist said. "The 'Teyvat Expedition Team' is arriving today via Romaritime Harbor!"

"The ones who saved Liyue?" another asked. "And stopped the Vision Hunt in Inazuma? The Traveler and his 'Troupe'?"

Ena froze, ducking behind a decorative pillar to listen.

"Troupe?" she whispered.

"I heard Lady Furina is planning a special 'Welcome' right at the Harbor!" the journalist laughed, checking his pocket watch. "She wants to put them on trial immediately! Something about 'Illegal Entry' or 'Disrupting the Narrative'!"

"Arresting them for just stepping in here?" a passerby asked, sounding skeptical.

"I think so," the journalist nodded gravely. "I heard **Clorinde** would be there too. If the Champion Duelist is escorting the Archon, she means business."

"Classic Furina," the other sighed. "Always the drama."

Ena's heart hammered in her chest.

'They're here,' she realized. *'Mafuyu. Ichika. Tsukasa. Haruka. They're arriving right now.'*

She wanted to run to the harbor. But she looked at herself—soaked, exhausted, and shivering. And if Clorinde and the Archon were waiting... walking in there now would just get her arrested alongside them.

'I'll wait at the hotel. They'll come.'

Location: Hotel Debord - Room 304

The hotel was luxurious. The concierge didn't even blink at her appearance once she showed the premium ticket Alice had provided.

"Welcome, Miss Shinonome. Your suite is ready."

Ena stumbled into the room. It was warm. There was a soft bed, a view of the city, and a plate of macarons on the table.

She stripped off her wet hoodie and collapsed onto the bed. The mattress was soft, but she felt like she was still falling through the stars.

The room was quiet. Too quiet.

She rolled over onto her back, staring at the ceiling.

Usually, when it was this quiet, she would log into **Nightcord**. She would hear the soft clicks of Kanade typing, or Mizuki's teasing laughter, or Mafuyu's steady breathing.

"Mizuki..." Ena whispered.

She reached into her bag. She pulled out her smartphone. It was dry (waterproof case), but the screen was black.

She pressed the power button.

Nothing.

She pressed it again.

[NO SIGNAL] [BATTERY: CRITICAL]

"Right," Ena laughed, a dry, choking sound. "Different world. No Wi-Fi."

She curled around the phone, clutching it to her chest like a lifeline.

"You better be looking for me, you idiot," Ena sobbed into the pillow. "Because I'm... I'm really lonely right now."

She closed her eyes, the image of the red rift and Mizuki's terrified face burning in her mind.

Outside the window, a deep, resonant horn blasted across the water.

It wasn't the cheerful toot of an aquabus. It was the heavy, grinding roar of a massive engine. The sound of gears turning and steam venting.

The **Steampunk Ship** from **Port Ormos, Sumeru** had arrived.

The Troupe was here. But for tonight, the Artist slept alone.

Chapter 126: Chapter 97: The Tea Party at Sea

Location: The "Atlas Route" (Sea between Sumeru and Fontaine) Time: 1 Day Before Arrival

The heavy industrial ship—a vessel of iron and steam chartered from Port Ormos—cut through the waves with a rhythmic *thrum-thrum-thrum* of its engine.

Unlike the wooden *Alcor*, this ship felt like a floating factory.

"The **Atlas Route**," the Captain, a gruff sailor from Snezhnaya, pointed to the chart. "We skirt the edge of the desert, pass the volcanic currents of **Natlan**, and navigate the straits of **Nod-Krai**. If the engines hold, we'll hit Romaritime Harbor by tomorrow morning."

"Natlan," Aether murmured, looking at the distant horizon to the west, where the sky glowed a faint, ominous red. "The Nation of War."

"We are not stopping there, I hope?" Tsukasa asked, gripping the railing. "My costume is not fireproof!"

"Straight to Fontaine," Haruka assured him. "We need to rest. This cabin is... cozy."

The "cabin" was a single large quarters shared by the whole troupe. It was cluttered with hammocks and crates. In the center of the room, bolted to a small table, sat a peculiar, garish pink teapot.

"Why is there a pink teapot?" Ichika poked it. "It doesn't match the decor."

"Maybe the previous passenger left it?" Paimon guessed. "Ooh! Maybe there's tea inside!"

Paimon reached for the lid.

RATTLE.

The teapot shook violently. Steam shot out of the spout in the shape of a skull.

"Do not drink me, little fairy! I am a communication device, not a beverage!"

"WAH!" Paimon flew backward, hiding behind Aether. "The teapot talked!"

"Of course I talk! I enchanted myself to be very conversational!"

The voice was cheerful, chaotic, and dangerously familiar.

"Alice?" Aether frowned.

"Bingo!" The teapot spun around. **"Hello, Traveler! And hello, Teyvat Expedition Team! Are you enjoying the cruise? I see you survived the desert. Good job on the whole**

'Robot God' thing. Very flashy."

"Alice-san?" Haruka stepped forward. "Why are you calling us now? Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No. Well... yes. A little bit," Alice's voice turned breezy. **"I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"**

"Good news!" Tsukasa yelled. "I cannot handle more tragedy!"

"The good news is," Alice chirped, **"You have a new cast member! A special delivery from Japan!"**

The room went silent.

"From... Japan?" Ichika gasped. "Someone came through?"

"She was drifting through the Sea of Quanta," Alice explained casually. **"I fished her out. She's a bit wet, and very grumpy, but she's safe. I dropped her off in the Court of Fontaine to wait for you."**

"Who?" Mafuyu asked, her voice tight. "Who is it?"

"A little artist," Alice teased. **"Very stubborn. Loves taking selfies. Hates mornings."**

"Ena," Mafuyu breathed out.

"Shinonome!" Tsukasa grabbed his head. "Ena is here?! In Teyvat?!"

"Is she okay?" Haruka asked frantically.

"She's fine," Alice assured them. **"She's at the Hotel Debord. Room 304. Go find her when you dock. She's probably lonely."**

"And the bad news?" Aether asked grimly.

The teapot stopped spinning. The steam turned cold, losing its playful shape.

"The bad news," Alice said, her voice dropping the cheerful facade, **"is that the Administrator didn't take your little reunion well. In fact, she is absolutely furious."**

"She realized she couldn't control the signal, so she did the only thing a scared system knows how to do: she pulled the plug. She has initiated a total lockdown of the Sekais. Your friends are trapped inside a quarantine I can't even scratch."

"They're trapped?" Ichika whispered, clutching her chest. "Saki... Honami..."

"They are alive," Alice said quickly. **"But the Administrator is jealous. And a jealous god is a dangerous thing. She hates that you have a connection she can't understand."**

Alice paused, the teapot rattling slightly as if suppressing a laugh.

"However... as much as I despise her for locking them away... she may have just made a fatal calculation error."

"Error?" Haruka frowned.

"She thinks she is securing her walls," Alice's voice turned cryptic, low and humming with secret knowledge. **"But she forgets what *built* those walls in the first place. She is trying to silence the noise to keep order... but she doesn't realize that by cutting off the connection, she is cutting off the supply."**

"Think of it like a fire, little ones. If you stop feeding it wood because you're afraid of being burned... eventually, you just freeze to death."

Mafuyu looked up.

'Feed the fire,' Mafuyu thought. *'The emotions. The songs. If she locks them away... she starves herself.'*

"She is leaving herself vulnerable," Alice concluded. **"She just doesn't know it yet."**

The teapot rattled one last time.

"Oh, and don't trust the Hydro Archon's acting skills. She's almost as dramatic as the boy in the coat. Toodles!"

POOF.

The teapot went silent. It was just a teapot again.

Location: The Cabin (Aftermath)

Silence filled the room. The engine hummed beneath their feet.

"Ena is here," Mafuyu said. She sat on a hammock, staring at the floor. "Because she tried to save us."

"And the others are trapped," Haruka clenched her fists. "Because we reached out."

"We have to get to Fontaine," Tsukasa stood up. He wasn't posing. He walked to the porthole, looking at the approaching wall of water that marked the Romaritime Harbor. "We have to find Ena. We have to know what happened."

"Room 304," Ichika repeated. "Hotel Debord."

"We're coming, Ena," Aether said.

Location: Romaritime Harbor Time: Present Day

The ship’s horn blared—a deep, resonant sound that echoed against the massive waterfalls surrounding the nation.

The vessel drifted into the dock of the Romaritime Harbor. The massive elevator to the upper plateau loomed above them.

"We’re here," Paimon said, floating nervously.

Aether stepped onto the dock. "Let's go. Straight to the Court."

"HALT!"

A spotlight—seemingly coming from nowhere—hit them.

Standing on a lower balcony overlooking the dock, posing with a cane and a top hat, was a young woman with white and blue hair and mismatched eyes.

Furina. The Hydro Archon.

Behind her, looking bored but deadly, stood the Champion Duelist, **Clorinde**.

The crowd of sailors and tourists gasped. "It’s Lady Furina! In the flesh!"

"My, my!" Furina announced, her voice echoing through the harbor. "The famous Traveler! And his... motley crew of dimensional stowaways! I’ve been expecting you!"

Tsukasa blinked. He looked at Furina. He saw the pose. The projection. The command of the audience.

"That pose..." Tsukasa whispered, awe-struck. "That projection... She is... a rival?"

"She’s the Archon," Haruka hissed.

"Traveler!" Furina pointed her cane at them. "You think you can just waltz into my nation? The laws of Fontaine are absolute!"

"We haven't done anything yet!" Paimon yelled.

"Au contraire!" Furina grinned. "You are in violation of the **Fontaine Aviation Law, Section 7, Paragraph 3**!"

She pointed a gloved finger at Paimon.

" 'All flying objects within the harbor limits must be tethered to their owner'! That floating child is untethered! It is a safety hazard!"

"Paimon is not an object!" Paimon shrieked.

"Clorinde!" Furina commanded. "Arrest them for reckless negligence!"

Clorinde sighed, her hand drifting to her pistol. The Gardes moved to surround the group.

"Wait!" Ichika grabbed her claymore handle.

"Hold on."

A card flew through the air, landing perfectly at Furina's feet. It exploded into a puff of confetti.

A young man in a magician's top hat appeared from the smoke, standing between the troupe and the guards.

Lyney.

"My apologies, Lady Furina," Lyney bowed theatrically. "But I believe there is a misunderstanding. You see..."

He walked over to Paimon. He waved his hand over her head. A thin, almost invisible string of Hydro element (a trick) shimmered for a second.

"She *is* tethered," Lyney smiled. "By the invisible bond of friendship! And... this very real magical wire I just manifested. See?"

The crowd murmured. "Oh! A magic trick!" "He's right!"

Furina froze. Her script was broken. The audience was distracted by the magician.

She flushed red. She cleared her throat loudly.

"Hmph! A... a magical wire? Very well!" Furina spun her cane. "I suppose I can overlook it this once! Consider this a warning!"

She leaned over the balcony railing, glaring at Aether and the troupe.

"But know this, Traveler! And you... strange actors! Fontaine is watching! Do not think you can hide your secrets from the God of Justice!"

She spun around, her coat flaring.

"Clorinde! We are leaving! The show is over!"

She marched off, trying to maintain her dignity as the crowd applauded Lyney.

"She is..." Tsukasa wiped a tear from his eye. "Magnificent. What a dramatic exit! I must take notes!"

"She's insane," Haruka corrected.

Lyney turned to them, tipping his hat.

"Welcome to Fontaine," Lyney winked. "Where the drama never ends. I'm Lyney. And this..."

A girl appeared silently beside him. **Lynette**.

"...is my assistant, Lynette."

"You look like you need a guide," Lyney smiled. "Heading to the Court?"

"We are," Aether said. "We have a friend waiting for us."

Chapter 127: Chapter 98: The Rain and the Reunion

Location: Romaritime Harbor - The Lift

"So," Lyney smiled, tipping his hat as he led them toward the massive central elevator. "You've already met our beloved Archon. Quite the entrance, wasn't it?"

"It was... memorable," Haruka admitted, adjusting her gloves. "She seems very... involved in the legal process."

"Furina lives for the drama," Lynette added quietly, her cat ears twitching. "To her, the courtroom is just another stage."

"A kindred spirit!" Tsukasa declared. "Though her accusation regarding Paimon was clearly an improvisational blunder!"

They stepped onto the lift. The gears ground to life, steam hissing from the vents as the platform ascended the massive waterfall.

"This technology," Ichika marveled, looking at the brass pipes and clockwork mechanisms. "It's completely different from Sumeru. It's not magic... it's machines."

"Indemnitium," Lyney explained. "The power source of Fontaine. Generated by the belief in justice... and the excitement of the Opera."

Location: The Clementine Line - Aquabus

At the top, they boarded the Aquabus—a sleek, boat-like tram that ran on water channels suspended in the air. A Melusine guide, **Elphane**, greeted them.

"Welcome aboard! Next stop: The Court of Fontaine!"

As the bus glided over the water, the view opened up. The landscape of Fontaine was lush, green, and impossibly elegant. But in the distance, the sky was gray.

"It's beautiful," Mafuyu said, leaning against the railing.

"It is," Lyney leaned beside her. "But don't let the beauty fool you. Fontaine has... a expiration date."

"Expiration date?" Aether asked.

Lyney's smile didn't fade, but his eyes grew serious.

"Have you heard the **Prophecy**?"

"No," Haruka shook her head.

Lyney recited it, his voice taking on a theatrical, storytelling cadence.

"The people of Fontaine are born with sin. No matter how the Nation of Justice holds trial, this sin cannot be cleansed."

"Until one day, the water levels will rise, and the people will dissolve into the sea. Only the Hydro Archon will remain, weeping on her throne."

Silence fell over the boat. The mechanical chugging of the engine seemed louder now.

"Dissolve?" Ichika whispered, horrified. "Like... melt?"

"Physically turn into water," Lynette confirmed. "People treat it like a myth. But... the water levels *are* rising."

Mafuyu looked at the water flowing beneath them.

"To dissolve," Mafuyu murmured. "To lose your shape. To become part of the ocean. It sounds like... erasure."

"It sounds like a tragedy written by a cruel playwright," Tsukasa gripped the railing. "We shall not accept such an ending! We just saved a nation from a false god; we can certainly save one from a flood!"

Lyney looked at Tsukasa. He grinned. "I hope you're right, Mr. Star. Because the audience is getting anxious."

Location: The Court of Fontaine

The Aquabus docked at the massive station in the city center. The Court of Fontaine was a sprawling metropolis of white stone, stained glass, and fashion.

"Wow," Paimon spun around. "It’s so fancy!"

"Focus," Aether said. "We need to find the **Hotel Debord**."

"It’s in the Vasari Passage," Lyney pointed. "Just past the Steam Bird offices. Lynette and I have a show to prepare for at the Opera Epiclese, so we must part ways here."

Lyney produced a card from thin air—a ticket.

"Come see the show later," Lyney winked. "I promise, it’ll be magical."

"We will be there!" Tsukasa took the ticket. "I shall critique your performance thoroughly!"

The magicians vanished into the crowd.

"Okay," Haruka took a deep breath. "Room 304. Let's go get her."

Location: Hotel Debord - Room 304

They stood outside the heavy wooden door.

"Do we knock?" Ichika asked nervously. "What if she's... you know... upset?"

"She was thrown through a dimensional rift by a jealous AI," Mafuyu said flatly. "She is likely very upset."

Tsukasa stepped forward. He adjusted his collar. He raised his hand.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Ena!" Tsukasa called out. "The cavalry has arrived! The Teyvat Expedition Team requests audience with the Artist!"

Silence.

Then, the sound of a lock clicking. Or rather, fumbling.

"Hold on," a muffled, raspy voice came from inside. "The chain is stuck."

Click.

The door swung open slowly.

Ena Shinonome stood in the doorway.

She looked... rough. She was wearing a hotel robe over her drying clothes. Her hair was messy. Her eyes were red and puffy, dark circles hanging under them like bruises. She held a dead smartphone in one hand as if it were a weapon.

She stared at them.

She looked at Tsukasa’s ridiculous Inazuman coat. She looked at Haruka’s spear. She looked at Ichika’s armor. She looked at Mafuyu’s mask.

"You're late," Ena whispered. Her voice cracked.

"We came by boat," Tsukasa said gently, dropping the stage persona. "It was... a long trip."

Ena looked at Mafuyu.

"She threw me," Ena choked out, tears welling up again. "Celestial Miku... she threw me into the sky. And Mizuki... Mizuki was crying."

"We know," Haruka stepped forward. "Alice told us."

Ena dropped the phone. She stepped forward and buried her face in Haruka’s chest, sobbing.

"I was all alone," Ena cried. "I landed in the water... and nobody knew who I was... and my phone won't work... and Akito isn't here!"

"We're here," Ichika joined the hug, wrapping her arms around Ena. "We're here now."

Tsukasa patted Ena's head awkwardly but kindly. "You are safe, Shinonome. We have secured the perimeter. And we have Mora for room service."

Mafuyu stood a little back. She watched Ena cry. She remembered the feeling of the Sekai glitching—the feeling of Kanade's hand slipping away.

"Ena," Mafuyu said.

Ena looked up, eyes blurry.

"Did you see her?" Mafuyu asked. "The Administrator?"

"I saw her," Ena wiped her nose. "She's... she's crazy, Mafuyu. She looked like Miku, but... wrong. She was screaming about being lonely."

"Lonely," Mafuyu repeated.

"She locked them in," Ena sniffled. "She said 'If I can't have a song, no one can.' She locked Kanade and the others inside the Sekai."

Aether clenched his fist. "So they're hostages."

"We have to save them," Ena grabbed Haruka's arm. "And we have to find Akito. Alice said... Alice said he was 'undergoing character development'. What does that mean?"

The troupe exchanged glances. Ichika looked away.

"We... have a lead on Akito," Aether said carefully. "But first... let's get you some clothes that aren't a bathrobe. And maybe some food."

"I want cheesecake," Ena demanded, her voice gaining a bit of its usual bite. "And I want to know why Tsukasa looks like a Prince from a bad anime."

"It is high fashion!" Tsukasa protested.

"Come on," Haruka smiled, steering Ena back into the room. "We have a lot to tell you. About dragons. And gods. And... everything."

As the door closed, the rain began to fall outside, washing over the Court of Fontaine.

The Troupe was reunited (mostly). But the Prophecy was ticking.

Chapter 128: Chapter 99: The Magic and the Murder

Location: Fountain of Lucine

The aquabus ride from the Court to the Opera Epiclese was a spectacle in itself, but the destination was breathtaking.

They stepped off the platform onto the white marble of the island. In the center of the plaza stood a massive fountain, its waters dancing in elaborate patterns, surrounded by statues of weeping angels.

"We made it," Haruka exhaled, adjusting her gloves. She looked at **Ena**, who was walking beside her, looking around with wide, critical eyes. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," Ena muttered, though she was gripping her new sketchbook (bought at the hotel gift shop) tightly. "This place is... a lot. It’s so bright. It feels like a theme park."

"It *is* a theme park!" Tsukasa corrected, spinning around. "A theme park of Justice! Look at the architecture! The drama!"

A Melusine patrol officer waddled up to them. "Welcome to the Opera Epiclese! Please, enjoy the fountain, but do not throw trash into the water. The Hydro Archon gets very upset."

"Understood," Aether nodded.

Ichika walked to the edge of the fountain. She stared into the water.

"It’s beautiful," Ichika whispered.

She closed her eyes, listening to the splash of the water.

‘...so lonely...’ ‘...I don't want to dissolve...’ ‘...please, help me...’

Ichika’s eyes snapped open. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Paimon asked.

"The voices," Ichika stepped back, clutching her chest. "There are... hundreds of voices. Crying. Inside the water."

Mafuyu walked up to the fountain. She touched the cold stone.

"It isn't just water," Mafuyu said softly. "It is tears. The whole fountain... is made of tears."

Ena shivered. "Okay. That’s creepy. Can we go to the show now?"

The Robot Waltz

As they turned toward the Opera House, a strange mechanical whirring sound echoed from the eastern garden.

Clank. Whir. Step.

"What is that?" Tsukasa perked up. "A sound cue?"

They walked toward the noise. In a small clearing, a crowd had gathered around a man in a grease-stained coat.

Standing before him was a tall, brass **Clockwork Meka**. But it wasn't a guard robot. It was wearing a top hat.

And it was dancing.

One, two, three. One, two, three.

The robot waltzed perfectly, its gears clicking in time to a music box playing nearby.

"Behold!" the creator, a man named **Guillaume**, shouted proudly. "The 'Clockwork Gentleman'! The first meka designed not for security, but for *art*!"

"Amazing!" Tsukasa ran to the front of the crowd. "Look at the articulation! The fluidity! It moves with more grace than some actors I know!"

"It's... actually really detailed," Ena admitted, pulling out a charcoal stick to sketch the joint mechanism. "The aesthetic is impressive."

Guillaume spotted them. "Ah! Outlanders! Do you appreciate the fine arts? Watch this!"

He snapped his fingers. The robot bowed, tipped its hat, and spun.

"Magnificent!" Tsukasa clapped until his hands hurt. "Sir, you are a visionary! If you ever need a dance partner for this machine, I volunteer!"

"I'll keep that in mind!" Guillaume beamed.

"We're going to be late," Haruka reminded them, grabbing Tsukasa's collar. "The Magic Show starts in ten minutes."

Location: Opera Epiclese - Main Hall

They entered the Opera House. It was colossal. Rows of velvet seats rose high into the dome.

In the VIP box, high above the stage, sat **Furina**. She looked bored, resting her cheek on her hand, while **Neuvillette** (the Chief Justice) sat stoically beside her.

"There she is," Aether whispered. "The Archon."

"She looks like she's waiting for us to mess up," Ena muttered.

The lights dimmed. A spotlight hit the stage.

"Mesdames et Messieurs!"

Lyney appeared in a burst of pyro sparks. **Lynette** emerged from a hat.

"Welcome to the Magic Show of the century!"

The performance was dazzling. Cards vanished. Doves appeared. Lyney swapped places with Lynette in the blink of an eye.

"He's good," Haruka admitted. "Very good."

"Now!" Lyney announced for the finale. "For the Switcheroo Trick! I shall teleport a lucky audience member from this box... to the entrance of the Opera House!"

A girl named **Halsey** was chosen. She stepped into the box.

Lyney began the countdown.

"Sixty seconds!"

The clock ticked. The audience held its breath.

"Three... Two... One..."

CRASH.

A sickening sound echoed from the stage.

It wasn't a teleportation sound. It was the sound of something heavy falling.

The water tank suspended above the stage smashed down onto the box.

"LYNEY!" Lynette screamed.

The stage was flooded. The box was crushed.

"Oh my god," Ichika stood up, horrified.

Lyney rushed to the box. He pulled the door open.

But Halsey wasn't inside.

Instead, the body of a man—**Cowell**, one of the assistants—tumbled out. He was limp. Dead.

Screams erupted from the audience.

"Murder!" someone shouted. "There's been a murder!"

The Accusation

The Opera House turned into chaos. Guards rushed the stage.

High in the VIP box, Furina stood up. Her boredom was gone. Her eyes were shining with manic excitement.

"A murder on stage!" Furina declared, her voice amplified by the acoustics. "During the most anticipated show of the season! How... *dramatic*!"

She pointed her cane down at the stage. At Lyney.

"Lock the doors! No one leaves! We shall hold a trial immediately!"

She looked at Lyney.

"Lyney! You are the magician! You controlled the box! Therefore... you are the prime suspect!"

"Wait!" Aether shouted, running down the aisle. "He didn't do it! We were watching him!"

Furina turned her gaze to Aether. She saw the troupe standing behind him.

"Ah," Furina grinned. "The Traveler. And his accomplices. You wish to defend him?"

"We do," Haruka said, stepping into the aisle. "Because we know what a performance looks like. And this wasn't part of the show."

"Excellent!" Furina clapped her hands. "Then it is decided! The Traveler and his Troupe vs. The Hydro Archon!"

She struck a pose.

"Let the trial begin! If you lose... you'll join him in the Fortress of Meropide!"

Ena gripped the back of the seat in front of her.

"We just got here," Ena whispered, her face pale. "And we're already lawyers?"

"Improvise, Ena," Tsukasa said grimly, adjusting his coat. "The script has changed. We are now... the Defense Attorneys!"

Chapter 129: Chapter 100: The Court of Lies

Chapter Notes

HAPPY CHAPTER 100
YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!

PUT TANK IN A MALLL!!!!

Location: Opera Epiclese - The Stage

"Order! Order!" **Neuvillette** slammed his cane, silencing the murmuring crowd. "The defense has requested time to investigate the crime scene. Granted. You have one hour before the trial reconvenes."

The audience watched as Aether and the troupe climbed onto the flooded stage.

"Okay," Aether took charge. "We need clues. Anything that proves Lyney wasn't in the tunnel when the tank fell."

"I'll check the ropes," **Haruka** said, activating her **Starglitter** spear to use as a probe. "The rope holding the tank... it looks like it was dissolved, not cut. Just like the 'dissolving' prophecy."

Ena walked carefully across the wet floorboards, holding her sketchbook. She sketched the position of the body and the debris, her artist's eye catching details others missed.

"This is... a lot," Ena muttered to Ichika. "In Shibuya, we just sing. Here, you guys solve murders?"

"We also fight gods," Ichika said casually, checking the magic box. "You get used to it."

"I don't *want* to get used to it," Ena sighed, shivering.

The Confrontation

They found the tunnel beneath the stage. It was empty, save for a smashed vent and a strange, familiar insignia dropped near the ladder.

Aether picked it up. His expression darkened.

"Lyney," Aether said, his voice cold.

Lyney and **Lynette** were waiting by the stage exit. Lyney looked nervous, wringing his hat in his hands.

"Did you find anything?" Lyney asked hopefully.

"We found this," Aether held up the insignia. "You didn't tell us you were **Fatui**."

The air in the room froze. Ena looked between them, confused.

"Fatui?" Ena blinked. "What's a Fatui?"

"The villains," **Tsukasa** whispered loudly to her, shielding her with his coat. "The antagonists of the first three Acts! They are a diplomatic military organization from Snezhnaya who specialize in plotting, scheming, and terrible fashion choices!"

"They killed Teppei," **Ichika** added, her hand drifting to her claymore, eyes flashing with anger.

"They tried to drown Liyue," **Haruka** crossed her arms.

Lyney sighed. He dropped the innocent magician act. His posture shifted—sharper, more guarded. The playful boy was gone; the intelligence agent remained.

"I didn't tell you because I knew you'd react like this," Lyney admitted. "Yes. Lynette and I are from the **House of the Hearth**. We serve the Tsaritsa. But that doesn't mean we killed Cowell."

"You serve the Cryo Archon," **Mafuyu** said, stepping forward.

Lyney looked at Mafuyu. A spark of recognition flashed in his eyes.

"I know you," Lyney said softly. "The reports from Mondstadt. 'The Empty One.' The girl who scratched **La Signora**."

Ena gasped. "You scratched a what?!"

"She was rude," Mafuyu said simply.

"You have quite the reputation in the House," Lyney chuckled, though it wasn't a warm sound. "Attacking a Harbinger... brave. Or foolish. The Tsaritsa doesn't take kindly to those who damage her favorite toys."

"Speaking of Harbingers!" Tsukasa stepped forward, pointing a finger accusingly. "We have experience dealing with your kind! We defeated Childe! We outsmarted Signora! And we even reformed the **Balladeer**! Why, just last week, Scaramouche was—"

SMACK.

Haruka’s hand clamped firmly over Tsukasa’s mouth.

"Mmph?!"

"Tsukasa means," Haruka said, smiling sweetly (and terrifyingly) at Lyney. "We have encountered many Fatui. And we know they are dangerous. We aren't discussing... *fictional* characters."

She glared at Tsukasa. *‘Shut up. The world forgot him. Don't ruin it.’*

Lyney narrowed his eyes. He tilted his head, looking genuinely confused.

"The Balladeer?" Lyney asked. "You mean the **Sixth Seat**? That seat has been empty for hundreds of years. Why would you claim to have reformed a ghost?"

Tsukasa blinked against Haruka's hand. *'Right. The memory wipe.'*

"He... uh..." Aether stepped in, thinking fast. "He gets his scripts mixed up. He plays a lot of fantasy roles."

"I see," Lyney didn't look convinced, but he let it slide. "Regardless of your delusions or your history with the Fatui... put it aside. Right now, I am being framed. And if I go down, the truth of this case goes with me. Are you lawyers? Or are you executioners?"

Aether looked at the troupe. He looked at Ena, who was bewildered but trusting them.

"We're lawyers," Aether said. "For now. But no more secrets."

The Trial Begins

They returned to the courtroom. The lights dimmed. **Furina** sat on her high throne, looking delighted, kicking her feet.

"The hour is up!" Furina announced, her voice booming. "Traveler! Have you prepared your defense? Or shall we proceed straight to the sentencing?"

"We're ready," Aether stepped onto the podium.

"Then let the show begin!" Furina gestured.

"Wait," Ena whispered to Haruka. "Do we have a plan?"

"We have clues," Haruka whispered back. "We just need to connect them. Like choreography."

"And if we mess up?"

"Then we improvise!" Tsukasa declared (freed from Haruka's grip). "Objection! The prosecution is rushing the tempo!"

"Overruled!" Furina shouted back instantly. "I set the tempo! I am the Archon!"

"This is going to be a long day," Mafuyu noted.

Chapter 130: Chapter 101: The Rain of Tears

Chapter Notes

> I am skipping some parts about the first lawsuit of fontaine for the troupe, because i am also giving way for the fontainian world quests + arlecchino's development

Location: Opera Epiclese - Courtroom

"Objection!" Furina pointed her cane at Tsukasa. "Your 'Dramatic Theory' holds no water! The evidence clearly places Lyney in the tunnel!"

"But the timing!" Tsukasa argued, sweating under the spotlight. "For the trick to work, the countdown must be precise! If he was in the tunnel, he would have missed his cue!"

"Maybe he improvised!" Furina countered, playing to the crowd. "Magicians are masters of deceit! Just like actors!"

The **Oratrice Mecanique d'Analyse Cardinale** tilted toward the Prosecution. The audience was murmuring. They were losing.

"This is bad," Ena whispered, gripping the railing of the defendant's box. "She's turning the crowd against us. It’s not about truth; it’s about popularity."

"It’s a show," Haruka gritted her teeth. "We need a plot twist."

Aether scanned his notes. "The thud. The sound we heard."

"Wait," **Navia** stood up from the gallery. The president of the Spina di Rosula adjusted her hat. "I object to the Archon's narrative!"

"Navia?" Furina frowned. "You are not part of the defense."

"I am an interested party," Navia stated coolly. "Traveler, remember the sound? If Lyney abducted the girl... why did we hear a crash?"

"The vase!" Ichika shouted, realizing it. "The broken vase in the tunnel! If Lyney was kidnapping her, he would be quiet. But the crash was loud. It was a struggle!"

"And Cowell?" Haruka added. "Where does he fit in?"

"Cowell," Aether pointed at the board. "He wasn't the victim. He was the accomplice. He tried to kidnap Halsey, but something went wrong. The tank fell on *him*."

The logic clicked. The scales of the Oratrice tipped.

"The water," Mafuyu spoke up. Her voice was quiet, but in the silent courtroom, it carried. "The rope wasn't cut. It dissolved. Just like the prophecy."

Furina's confidence faltered. "Dissolved? Preposterous!"

"Test the water!" Aether demanded. "The water on the stage isn't normal water. It's **Primordial Seawater**!"

Neuvillette signaled the Gardes. They tested the sample.

"Confirmed. The water composition matches the primordial records."

The crowd gasped.

"Then..." Lyney stepped forward. "Cowell didn't just die. He was dissolved? And Halsey?"

"She wasn't dissolved," Aether said. "She was Liliane. The thief. She escaped because she isn't from Fontaine."

"Only people from Fontaine dissolve," Haruka realized. "That's the rule."

Neuvillette slammed his cane.

"The verdict is clear. Lyney is innocent. The true culprit... is the dissolved man, Cowell, acting under unknown orders."

Confetti rained down. The defense had won.

Furina slumped in her throne, looking defeated. "Hmph. A... lucky guess."

Location: Hotel Debord - Restaurant

It was raining hard when they left the Opera House. The "Hydro Dragon" was weeping.

Navia invited them to celebrate their victory (and their reunion with Ena) at the Hotel Debord.

"Cheers!" Navia raised a glass. "To the partners! You guys were amazing in there."

"It was stressful," Ena sighed, poking her food. "I thought we were going to jail."

"A Star never cracks under pressure!" Tsukasa declared (ignoring the fact that he had been shaking the whole time).

"Here," Navia pushed a bottle of bright orange soda toward **Ichika**. "Try this. It's **Fonta**. A local specialty. It's sweet and fizzy."

"Thank you," Ichika smiled. She was thirsty from all the shouting.

She popped the cap. She took a long swig.

The table went silent, waiting for her reaction.

Ichika swallowed. She frowned. She looked at the bottle.

"It’s..." Ichika smacked her lips. "It’s really salty."

"Salty?" Navia blinked. "Fonta is supposed to be sweet orange."

"No," Ichika shook her head. "It tastes like... ocean water. Is this a prank?"

Navia froze. Her face went deadly pale. She snatched the bottle from Ichika’s hand.

"Don't drink anymore," Navia whispered.

"Why?" Tsukasa asked. "Is it expired?"

"Melus!" Navia shouted to her bodyguard. "Check the bottle!"

Melus, the butler, took a drop of the liquid and touched it to a phial of testing reagent. The liquid turned blood red.

"Mademoiselle," Melus said grimly. "This isn't Fonta. It has been spiked with **Primordial Seawater**."

"WHAT?!" Paimon shrieked.

"Primordial Seawater?" Haruka stood up, knocking her chair over. "The stuff that dissolves people?!"

"Ichika!" Mafuyu grabbed Ichika’s shoulders. "Are you okay? Do you feel pain?"

"I... I feel fine," Ichika blinked, confused. "It just tasted bad. Why? What happens if you drink it?"

"If a Fontainian drinks this..." Navia’s voice trembled. "They turn into water. Instantly."

"But Ichika isn't from Fontaine," Aether realized, relief washing over him. "She’s from Earth. The Sekai. The prophecy doesn't apply to her."

"She’s an alien," Ena whispered. "Holy crap. Ichika is immune to the apocalypse."

Suddenly, a waiter near the kitchen dropped a tray. He looked terrified. He started running for the exit.

"Get him!" Silver shouted.

The waiter—an assassin sent to silence Navia—panicked. He grabbed a leftover vial of the Seawater from his pocket, intending to throw it at Navia.

But he tripped.

The vial smashed against his own chest.

The Horror

"No! NO!" The waiter screamed.

The troupe watched in horror.

Where the water touched his skin, he didn't burn. He *melted*. His skin turned transparent. His bones liquefied.

"Help me!"

His voice gurgled. Within seconds, his clothes fell to the floor in a wet heap. There was no body. Just a puddle of water spreading on the carpet.

Silence. Absolute, terrified silence.

Ena covered her mouth, retching. Tsukasa turned away, pale as a sheet.

"He's... gone," Haruka whispered. "Just like that."

Ichika looked at the puddle. Then she looked at the bottle of "Fonta" she had just drank from.

She realized that if she had been from this world... she would be a puddle right now.

"Someone tried to kill you," Aether said to Navia, his eyes cold. "They spiked your drink."

"And Ichika drank it instead," Navia whispered, looking at Ichika with a mix of horror and gratitude. "You... you saved my life. By being an alien."

"I..." Ichika felt faint. "I think I need to sit down."

"We need to leave," Mafuyu said, her eyes darting to the shadows. "This city is not safe. The water is a weapon."

Chapter 131: Chapter 102: The Vision and the Paint

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: Café Lucerne

"I cannot believe we drank dissolve-juice," Tsukasa shuddered, staring at his cup of coffee as if it might bite him. "This country is hazardous to my health."

"We need to relax," Haruka said, though she was still gripping her fork tightly. "The trial is over. We have some downtime before we figure out our next move."

"May we join you?"

Lyney and **Lynette** approached the table. They weren't in their stage costumes, but casual clothes.

"Please," Aether gestured to the empty chairs.

"We wanted to thank you properly," Lyney said, his smile genuine for once, minus the performer's sparkle. "You saved my life. And the reputation of the House."

"We just told the truth," Ichika said.

"Brother?" a soft voice came from behind Lyney.

Freminet walked up, holding his diving helmet. He stopped when he saw Ena.

"You," Freminet blinked. "You dried off."

"You!" Ena pointed a finger. "You're the diving kid! The one who fished me out!"

"You know him?" Lyney looked between them.

"He saved me when I fell from the sky," Ena explained. "Wait... 'Brother'?"

"Freminet is our younger brother," Lynette explained, sipping tea. "He is the diver of the House."

Ena slumped back in her chair. "So the kid who saved me is a Fatui too? Is everyone in this city a secret agent?"

"Pretty much," Freminet muttered, hiding behind his helmet.

Location: Estelle's Forge

After coffee, they headed to the lower level to repair their gear. **Estelle**, the blacksmith, was hammering away at a piece of clockwork machinery.

"Repairs?" Estelle wiped grease from her face. "Let me see. Ooh, Liyue white iron? That's a heavy blade, miss. I can buff out the dents from the robot fight."

She looked at Ena, who was standing awkwardly in her new Fontaine clothes (bought by Alice's funds).

"And you? You look defenseless."

"I... I don't fight," Ena admitted. "I paint."

"Paintbrushes don't stop mekas," Estelle grunted. She reached under the counter. "Here. A **Finale of the Deep**. It's a standard Fontaine longsword. Balanced. Good for beginners."

Ena took the sword. It was heavy. "I guess... I have to learn."

"Well, look at this," a familiar, teasing voice echoed from the street. "The gang is arming up. Planning a coup?"

Childe leaned against a lamppost, juggling a bag of Mora. He looked relaxed, his grey suit pristine.

"Childe!" Paimon gasped. "Are you here to cause trouble?"

"Relax," Childe laughed, walking over. "I'm not here on official Fatui business. The Tsaritsa didn't send me. I'm here on a... personal vacation."

"Vacation?" Aether narrowed his eyes.

"I'm looking for someone," Childe's expression grew serious for a second. "My master. The one who taught me how to survive in the Abyss. I caught her scent recently."

He looked at the troupe. His eyes landed on **Mafuyu**.

"You," Childe walked up to her.

Mafuyu looked up. "You want a rematch?"

"Ha! Maybe later," Childe grinned. He reached into his belt. He unclipped his **Hydro Vision**.

The glowing blue gem pulsed in his hand.

"Here," Childe tossed it to Mafuyu.

Mafuyu caught it, confused. "Your Vision?"

"It's been acting up lately," Childe shrugged. "It feels... heavy. And since you seem to be an expert on 'emptiness' and 'voids', I figure it's safer with you than with me right now. I rely on my Delusion and my steel anyway."

"You are giving a weapon to an enemy," Mafuyu stated.

"I'm giving it to a rival," Childe corrected. "Keep it safe for me. Don't lose it, or I'll have to kill you."

He turned to leave, glancing at **Ena**.

"By the way," Childe pointed at the artist. "That one. She's blank."

"Blank?" Tsukasa frowned.

"No elemental residue," Childe noted, his eyes scanning Ena's aura. "The rest of you... you buzz with **Anemo, Geo, Electro, Dendro**. You're walking batteries. But her? She's just a normal human. She's going to get eaten alive if she steps outside the city."

He waved. "Later, comrades."

Childe vanished into the crowd.

Mafuyu looked at the Hydro Vision in her hand. It felt warm.

The Realization

"He's right," Tsukasa gasped, grabbing his head. "Ena has no powers! And... wait!"

He looked at his own hands. He looked at Aether.

"WE FORGOT TO RESONATE AGAIN!" Tsukasa shouted. "We have been in Fontaine for twenty-four hours and we are still using Dendro! We are elementally outdated!"

"What are you talking about?" Ena asked, confused.

"Resonance!" Paimon flew in circles. "When Outlanders touch a Statue of the Seven, they get the element of that region! That's how we do magic without Visions!"

"You guys can use magic?" Ena stared at them.

"We can," Haruka nodded. "And if you touch the statue... maybe you can too."

"To the top level!" Tsukasa commanded. "To the Statue of the Divine!"

Location: Statue of The Seven (Court of Fontaine)

They took the lift to the highest point of the city, the Palais Mermonia plaza. The Statue of the Hydro Archon stood tall, overlooking the endless sea.

"Okay," Aether said. "Hydro is the element of change. Healing. Flow."

He touched it first.

SPLASH.

Blue light washed over him. He summoned a bubble of water in his hand. "Hydro. Check."

"My turn!" Tsukasa slapped the statue.

Water erupted around him. But it wasn't a graceful stream. It was a pressurized jet.

"AHA!" Tsukasa posed. "I am a fountain! I can create dramatic rain scenes on command!"

Ichika touched it. A ring of water droplets formed around her greatsword. "It feels... healing. Like the water is washing away the fatigue."

Haruka touched it. The water spiraled down her spear. "Fluidity. It’s like dancing underwater."

Mafuyu touched it. The water didn't flow around her. It became still. Heavy. Like the pressure of the deep ocean. "Pressure," she whispered.

Finally, Ena.

She stepped forward, nervous. She placed her hand on the cold stone.

Drip.

She felt a sensation in her mind. Not a flow. Not a wave.

Color.

Blue liquid swirled around her hand. But it didn't behave like water. It behaved like... ink. Thick, viscous, and controllable.

Ena swung her hand. The water lashed out like a whip of paint, splashing against the ground in a perfect arc.

"Whoa," Ena breathed. "It’s... like painting. But in 3D."

"You have powers now!" Paimon cheered. "You're a Hydro Artist!"

"Hydro..." Ena looked at the blue liquid floating around her fingers. She thought of the deep sea she had fallen into.

"Okay," Ena clenched her fist, the water dissolving into mist. "Now I can fight. Now I can help find Akito."

Chapter End Notes

Ena still has some catching up with the elements, ill work that out later

Chapter 132: Chapter 103: The Dragon and the Verdict

Location: Fountain of Lucine - The Clockwork Dancer

"One, two, spin. One, two, bow."

Tsukasa Tenma was mimicking the movements of the Clockwork Gentleman, his coat swirling in perfect sync with the machine.

"His posture is impeccable!" Tsukasa praised, wiping sweat from his brow. "Though he lacks vocal projection, his physical comedy is top-tier!"

Ena sat on the edge of the fountain, sketching the robot in her notebook. The movement of the gears fascinated her.

"It’s kind of creepy," Ena muttered, shading the brass joints. "But... it has a soul. In a weird, mechanical way."

"It’s just programming," Mafuyu said, watching the water dance. "Like the Akasha. But this one... dances for joy, not control."

"Hey! Travelers!"

A breathless voice interrupted their study of the arts. **Lyney** jogged toward them, clutching his top hat. He looked unusually frazzled, his stage persona stripped away by panic.

"Lyney?" Haruka stepped forward. "What’s wrong? Is the show canceled?"

"It’s Childe," Lyney gasped. "He’s at the Opera House. He just... he just challenged the Oratrice."

"He challenged a machine?" Ichika blinked.

"The verdict came back," Lyney explained hurriedly. "Guilty. For the serial disappearances of young women. But he didn't do it! We know he didn't!"

"The Fatui are being framed again?" Tsukasa frowned. "This script is repetitive!"

"He didn't take it well," Lyney grimaced. "He’s tearing the place apart. You have to come!"

Location: Opera Epiclese - Main Hall

They burst through the doors of the Opera House.

The audience was screaming, scrambling over seats to get away from the stage.

In the center of the courtroom, **Tartaglia** was laughing.

He was surrounded by broken Gardemeks. His body crackled with purple Electro lightning—his Delusion was active.

"Is that all?!" Childe roared, slashing a meka in half with a polearm made of pure energy. "I thought the Justice of Fontaine had teeth!"

He looked up at the high seat. At **Neuvillette**.

"I demand a trial by combat!" Childe shouted. "If the machine won't listen, maybe my blade will!"

"This is a court of law," Neuvillette stated calmly, not rising from his chair. "Not a coliseum. Stand down, Tartaglia."

"Make me!"

Childe's aura exploded. The floor cracked. Dark, starry water surged around him.

The Foul Legacy.

"He's transforming!" Ichika gasped, reaching for her claymore. "We have to stop him!"

"Wait," Mafuyu grabbed Ichika's arm. Her eyes were locked on the high seat. "Look at the Judge."

Neuvillette hadn't moved. He was watching Childe with a look of mild disappointment.

Childe launched himself into the air. He became a streak of abyssal lightning, aiming directly for Neuvillette's throat.

"DIE!"

Neuvillette stood up. He didn't draw a weapon. He simply raised his cane.

But Childe was faster than anyone expected. In a burst of desperate speed, he bypassed the cane's guard. His Electro-infused blade slashed across Neuvillette's cheek.

SHING.

A thin line of blood appeared on the Chief Justice's pale face.

The crowd gasped. The Hydro Archon, Furina, covered her mouth in shock.

Neuvillette blinked. He touched his cheek. He looked at the blood on his glove.

Then, the air in the Opera House became heavier than the ocean floor.

"Silence."

Neuvillette slammed his cane into the ground.

BOOM.

It wasn't a spell. It was pure authority.

Childe, who was mid-air preparing a second strike, was slammed into the floor by an invisible, crushing weight. His Foul Legacy armor shattered instantly. The Abyssal energy dissipated like smoke.

"Gah...!" Childe coughed blood, pinned to the ground, unable to move a finger.

Neuvillette walked down the steps. The wound on his cheek was already closing, healing with a faint blue glow.

"You have disrupted the court," Neuvillette said, his voice vibrating in their bones. "You have attacked the Chief Justice. And you have been declared Guilty by the Oratrice."

He looked down at the harbinger.

"Take him to the Fortress of Meropide."

The Aftermath

Gardemeks swarmed the downed Harbinger, shackling him in heavy metal restraints. Childe was unconscious, his face bruised, defeated in a single move.

Mafuyu stared at Neuvillette.

She remembered fighting Childe in Liyue. She remembered how strong he was. How it took the entire troupe and Aether to bring him down.

And Neuvillette had crushed him with a word.

"He..." Mafuyu whispered. "He is not human."

"He took a hit though," Aether noted, looking at the fading mark on Neuvillette’s face. "Childe actually scratched him."

"Is that supposed to be comforting?" Ena asked, her voice trembling. "He just swatted a super-villain like a fly! Is this nation normal?! Do all the lawyers have superpowers?!"

"Welcome to Fontaine," Haruka sighed.

Neuvillette turned to the audience.

"The trial is concluded," he announced. "However... the verdict of the Oratrice regarding the Serial Disappearances is... puzzling."

He looked at Aether and the troupe.

"The Traveler and his companions proved the defendant's innocence regarding the murder of Cowell. Yet the machine declared him Guilty of the larger case."

He walked over to them. Up close, his presence was overwhelming. He smelled of rain and deep water.

"Traveler," Neuvillette said. "I have a request. The Fortress of Meropide is a place of secrets. If the Oratrice is correct, there is something hidden in the prison connected to the disappearances."

"You want us to go to jail?" Tsukasa asked.

"I want you to investigate," Neuvillette corrected. "Go as inmates. Find out why the machine thinks Tartaglia is guilty. And... keep an eye on him."

"We're going to prison," Ena groaned, sliding down the wall. "Alice promised me a vacation. This is not a vacation."

"It is a new setting!" Tsukasa declared, though he looked pale. "The Prison Arc! A classic trope of redemption stories! We accept!"

"We do?" Ichika asked.

"We have to," Aether said seriously. "If the prophecy is true... the answer might be down there. In the deep."

Neuvillette nodded.

"Arrangements will be made. Prepare yourselves. The Fortress is not a place for the faint of heart."

As they left the Opera House, Mafuyu looked back at the empty stage.

'The machine decides who is guilty,' she thought. *'But who judges the machine?'*

Chapter 133: Chapter 104: The Father and the Fugitives

Location: Hotel Debord - Suite 304

The morning light filtered through the curtains, but the mood in the room was anything but bright.

"Let me get this straight," Ena said, sitting on the edge of her bed, clutching a pillow. "I fell from space. I nearly drowned. I got reunited with you guys. And now... our next destination is *prison*?"

"It is an undercover mission!" Tsukasa corrected, adjusting his collar in the mirror. "We are not inmates; we are deep-cover agents! Like in *The Spy Who Loved The Stage*!"

"We're inmates, Senpai," Ichika sighed, packing a small bag. "Neuvillette said we have to go through the official processing. That means... mugshots. Uniforms. The works."

"I don't want to go to jail," Ena groaned, flopping back onto the bed. "Can't I just stay here and paint? Alice paid for the room."

"It's safer down there," Haruka said gently. "Remember what happened at the restaurant? That waiter tried to dissolve Navia. The Fatui are moving in the city, and they know we interfered with the trial. Staying alone in a hotel is dangerous."

"Fine," Ena huffed, grabbing her bag. "But if the food is bad, I'm rioting."

"We have a meeting at the Palais Mermonia," Aether said, checking his map. "Neuvillette is preparing our paperwork. Let's go."

Location: Palais Mermonia - Chief Justice's Office

They took the lift up to the massive administrative building. The Melusine guards ushered them through the halls, but they stopped just outside the majestic double doors of the Chief Justice's office.

"Wait," Aether held up a hand.

Voices were drifting through the heavy wood. Tense, quiet voices.

"...diplomatic immunity does not cover the destruction of the Opera House, ***Lady Arlecchino****."* That was Neuvillette. His tone was polite, but cold as ice.

"Arlecchino?" Paimon whispered, floating closer to the door. "That's... The Knave! The Fourth Harbinger!"

"Another Harbinger?" Tsukasa paled. "Does this organization have an unlimited supply of villains?"

"And I am not asking for immunity for Tartaglia," a smooth, low female voice replied from inside. It sounded like dark velvet wrapped around a blade. *"He made a mess. He can sit in timeout. My concern... is my children."*

"Lyney and Lynette were proven innocent!" Furina's voice squeaked, sounding unusually high-pitched and shaky. *"The court cleared them! You have no leverage here!"*

"Do I not?" the low voice chuckled darkly. *"You seem nervous, Furina. Is the Hydro Archon afraid of a mere diplomat?"*

"She's bullying the Archon," Ichika whispered, horrified.

Aether pushed the doors open.

The office was freezing.

Neuvillette sat behind his massive desk, his hands clasped, staring daggers at the guest. **Furina** stood near the window, gripping her cane so hard her knuckles were white. She was trying to look imperious, but she was visibly sweating.

And sitting comfortably in the guest chair, sipping tea as if she owned the building, was a tall woman with black-and-white hair and eyes that had red 'X' pupils.

Arlecchino. The Knave.

She didn't turn around immediately. She took a slow sip of tea.

"Ah," Arlecchino said calmly. "The witnesses have arrived."

She stood up and turned. Her presence filled the room. She wasn't emitting elemental energy like Childe or Scaramouche. She didn't need to. Her mere existence felt like a threat.

"Traveler," Arlecchino nodded. "And the... 'Troupe', I believe Lyney called you?"

"Arlecchino," Aether stood his ground.

"Relax," Arlecchino smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. It was a professional one. "I am not here to fight. I am here to discuss the... unfair treatment of the House of the Hearth. Lyney was nearly convicted because of your nation's prejudice."

She looked at Neuvillette.

"I will be visiting the Fortress to check on Tartaglia. And to ensure my children are not harassed further. I trust the Gardes will not impede me?"

"The Fortress is open to visitation," Neuvillette said stiffly. "Provided you follow protocol."

"I always follow protocol," Arlecchino said smoothly.

She walked toward the door. The troupe parted to let her pass—instinctively making way for a predator.

As she passed **Mafuyu**, she stopped.

The air grew heavy.

Arlecchino looked down at the purple-haired girl. She looked at the white mask clipped to Mafuyu’s belt.

"You," Arlecchino murmured.

Mafuyu looked up. Her eyes were empty. Arlecchino’s eyes were a void.

"Signora wrote about you in her final report," Arlecchino said softly, so only they could hear. "The girl with no Vision who cuts like the wind. She said you were... 'disgusting'."

Ena gasped, reaching for Mafuyu’s arm.

Arlecchino tilted her head. A flicker of genuine curiosity crossed her face.

"But you don't look disgusting to me," Arlecchino whispered. "You look... burned out. Like a candle that has forgotten it can go out."

She leaned in.

"I wonder... if you burn, what color will the ash be?"

Mafuyu didn't flinch.

"I am already ash," Mafuyu replied flatly.

Arlecchino paused. Then, a small, appreciative smirk touched her lips.

"Fascinating," Arlecchino straightened up. "We will speak again. I have a feeling our paths in the deep will cross."

She nodded to Aether.

"Good luck in prison, Traveler. Try not to drop the soap."

She swept out of the room, her coat trailing behind her like a shadow.

The Aftermath

As soon as the door clicked shut, Furina collapsed into a chair, fanning herself frantically.

"The nerve of that woman!" Furina cried, her voice cracking. "Threatening *me*? In my own office! Does she not know who I am?!"

"She knows exactly who you are, Lady Furina," Neuvillette said gravely. "That is why she threatens you."

He turned to the troupe.

"You saw her. That is The Knave. She is not like Childe. She does not fight for sport. She plays the long game. If she is interested in the Fortress... it means the Fatui are planning something down there."

"She looked at Mafuyu," Ichika said worriedly. "She knows who we are."

"She knows we are variables," Haruka corrected. "Which means we need to be careful."

Neuvillette pulled a stack of papers from his drawer.

"These are your transfer papers," Neuvillette said. "You will enter the Fortress of Meropide as convicts charged with... let's say, 'Public Nuisance' and 'Illegal Pyrotechnics'."

"Hey!" Tsukasa protested. "My pyrotechnics were artistic!"

"Ena," Neuvillette looked at the artist. "Since you have no elemental resonance, you will be processed as a non-combatant. Stick close to the others. The Fortress has its own laws."

"Great," Ena muttered, taking the paper. "Prison arc. My favorite."

"Go," Neuvillette commanded. "Find out why the Oratrice convicted Tartaglia. And find out what Arlecchino is looking for."

"We're on it," Aether nodded.

As they left the office, Mafuyu touched her neck where Arlecchino’s gaze had lingered.

‘She sees me,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘Not as a variable. But as a mirror.’*

Chapter 134: Chapter 105: Welcome to the Meropide

Location: Opera Epiclese - The Prisoner Lift

The massive iron gate slammed shut, separating the troupe from the sunlight of the surface.

Neuvillette stood on the other side of the bars. He looked solemn.

"The paperwork is processed," Neuvillette said, his voice echoing in the shaft. "You are now officially inmates of the Fortress of Meropide. Your sentence is forty-five days for 'Public Endangerment' and 'Unlawful Use of Pyrotechnics'."

"Forty-five days?!" Tsukasa gripped the bars. "That is an entire theatrical season!"

"It is a cover," Neuvillette reminded him quietly. "Use the time wisely. Find out why the Oratrice convicted Tartaglia. And be careful. The Fortress operates on its own laws. Even I cannot intervene directly down there."

He nodded to Aether.

"May the Hydro Archon watch over you."

The lift jerked. Gears ground together.

They began to drop.

Location: The Descent

Down. Down. Down.

The light from the surface faded into a pinprick, then vanished. The air grew heavy and humid. The sound of the ocean pressing against the walls was a constant, low thrum.

Ena was hyperventilating. She sat on the floor of the lift, knees to her chest, eyes squeezed shut.

"Water," Ena whispered. "We're underwater. Miles of water."

"It’s okay," Haruka sat next to her, rubbing her back. "The walls are thick. We aren't drowning."

"It feels like the void," Mafuyu noted, looking at the dark metal. "But wet."

The lift stopped with a heavy *clank*. The doors hissed open.

Waiting for them was a man in a rough, grey uniform. He had a scar on his cheek and looked like he chewed rocks for breakfast.

Deakin. (Inmate Receptionist).

"Fresh meat?" Deakin grunted, looking over his clipboard. "The Traveler. And... a circus troupe? What is the Fortress coming to?"

"We are the Teyvat Expedition Team!" Tsukasa stepped out, trying to adjust his coat (which had been confiscated and replaced with a drab prison uniform, though he had managed to keep his scarf). "And we demand the VIP suite!"

"You get a bunk and a job," Deakin spat. "Follow me. And keep your mouths shut."

The Underwater View

They walked through the intake tunnel. The path was lined with massive, reinforced glass windows.

Outside, the deep ocean of Fontaine swirled. Glowing jellyfish drifted past. A massive, armored crab scuttled along the seabed. It was beautiful, alien, and terrifyingly vast.

"Look," Ichika pointed. "The light from the surface... it doesn't reach here."

Ena peeked through her fingers. She saw a school of Blubberbeasts swimming lazily by.

"We are in a fish tank," Ena shuddered. "We are the fish."

"Keep moving," Deakin ordered. "Sightseeing is for tourists. You're property of the Duke now."

Location: Administrative Area - Processing

"Line up. Face front. No smiling."

The camera flashed.

- **Aether:** Looked stoic. Standard hero mugshot.
- **Paimon:** Looked angry (she was holding a sign that said "ACCOMPLICE").
- **Ichika:** Looked nervous, clutching her hands.
- **Haruka:** Looked professional. Perfect posture. Even in a mugshot, she looked like an idol.
- **Mafuyu:** Looked dead inside. The camera operator actually shivered.
- **Ena:** Covered her face with her arm. "Don't look at me."

- **Tsukasa:** Struck a dramatic profile pose. "Capture my good side! The side of Justice wrongfully imprisoned!"

"Done," the guard sighed. "Here are your IDs. Don't lose them. Your life depends on them."

Location: The Duke's Office

They were marched into the central office. It was the only room that looked comfortable—leather chairs, a tea set, and a massive mechanical fan spinning overhead.

Sitting behind the desk, reading a newspaper and sipping tea, was a man with messy black hair, scars, and cryo-infused gauntlets on his desk.

Wriothesley. The Duke.

"Deakin," Wriothesley didn't look up. "Are these the troublemakers?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Deakin saluted. "Processed and ready."

"Good work," Wriothesley reached into a drawer. He pulled out a handful of small, metal tickets. **Credit Coupons**. "Here. Your referral bonus."

Deakin grabbed the coupons greedily. "Thank you, Duke!" He scrambled out of the room.

Wriothesley folded his newspaper. He looked at the group. His eyes were sharp, calculating, and amused.

"So," Wriothesley smiled. "The Traveler. And the 'anomalies' Neuvillette warned me about."

"We prefer 'guests'," Tsukasa corrected.

"In here, you are whatever I say you are," Wriothesley said, standing up. He walked around the desk. He was huge. Intimidating.

"Here is the situation. You are in the **Fortress of Meropide**. Down here, Mora is useless. We trade in **Credit Coupons**. You work, you get coupons. You eat, you pay coupons. You breathe... well, breathing is free, for now."

He tossed a set of keys to Aether.

"Your cell is in the Dormitory Block. **Cell 404**."

"One key?" Ena frowned. "Wait. Is that for... all of us?"

"Yes," Wriothesley nodded. "It's a large cell. Bunk beds."

"I object!" Ena stepped forward, her indignation overriding her fear. "We are a mixed group! And I... I need privacy! I can't sleep in a room with... *him*!" She pointed at Tsukasa (who was practicing his 'hardened criminal' face in a reflection).

"And Ichika needs space! And Mafuyu... Mafuyu stares at people when they sleep!"

"I do not," Mafuyu said. (She totally did).

Wriothesley stopped. He walked up to Ena. He loomed over her, his shadow engulfing the small artist.

He leaned down, his voice dropping to a whisper that only the troupe could hear.

"Listen, kid," Wriothesley murmured. "I know why you're here. I know about the Fatui. I know about Arlecchino."

Ena froze.

"The Knave has eyes everywhere down here," Wriothesley said, his eyes cold. "Spies. Moles. If I separate you... I can't guarantee you won't wake up with a knife in your ribs."

He pulled back, his charming smile returning as if he hadn't just threatened them.

"So," Wriothesley announced loudly. "For the sake of *efficiency* and *resource management*, you will share a cell. It builds character! Camaraderie!"

He clapped Tsukasa on the shoulder.

"Right, Mr. Star?"

"Uh... yes!" Tsukasa gulped. "Camaraderie! We shall bond through the shared struggle of incarceration!"

"Good," Wriothesley sat back down. "Now get out. Dinner service starts in ten minutes. And don't be late. The welfare meals run out fast."

Location: Cell 404

They found the cell. It was... grim. Metal bunks. A single toilet behind a screen. The constant hum of machinery.

"Home sweet home," Haruka sighed, throwing her bag on a bottom bunk.

Ena sat on the top bunk, pulling her knees to her chest. She looked at the heavy iron door as it slid shut.

CLANG.

"Locked," Ichika whispered.

"We are trapped," Mafuyu said, looking at the small barred window that showed only the dark water outside.

"No," Aether said, looking at his new ID card. "We're undercover. We have a job to do."

Tsukasa stood in the center of the cell. He looked at his depressing surroundings.

"Alright!" Tsukasa clapped. "First order of business! We must redecorate! This lighting is atrocious for morale!"

"Tsukasa," Ena groaned, burying her face in her pillow. "Shut up."

Chapter 135: Chapter 106: The Rules of the Deep

Location: Coupon Cafeteria
Time: 07:00 AM (Cycle Start)

The line for breakfast was long, silent, and smelled faintly of rust.

"Next," the robot supervisor droned.

Aether stepped up. The meka plonked a tray onto the counter. On it sat a bowl of something gray, lumpy, and steaming.

"One **Welfare Meal**," the robot announced. "Complimentary for all inmates. Enjoy."

"Enjoy?" Ena peered over Aether's shoulder, her face turning green. "That looks like wet cement. Is that... a fish tail sticking out of it?"

"It is protein," **Bran** (the human supervisor) grunted, leaning against the wall. "If you want steak, earn some Coupons. If you want flavor, earn some Coupons. If you want a fork that isn't bent... earn some Coupons."

"I sense a theme," Haruka sighed, taking her tray.

They found a table in the corner. The atmosphere was oppressive. Inmates ate quickly, eyes darting around, guarding their food.

Tsukasa stared at his bowl. He poked the gray lump with his spoon. It jiggled.

"This is an insult to the culinary arts!" Tsukasa whispered furiously. "It lacks texture! It lacks color! It lacks... edibility!"

"Just eat it," Mafuyu said, calmly spooning the gray sludge into her mouth. "It is fuel."

Ena watched Mafuyu eat with horror. "You really are empty inside, aren't you?"

"We need a plan," Aether said, forcing himself to swallow a bite. "We have zero Coupons. We can't buy information, we can't buy better food, and we can't access the restricted areas where Childe might be."

"Then we work," Haruka decided. "We split up to maximize earnings and coverage."

She pointed to the map on the wall.

"**Tsukasa** and **Aether**. You two have the highest physical strength. Go to the **Production Zone**. They need people to process raw ore. It pays well for heavy labor."

"Manual labor!" Tsukasa stood up. "Very well! I shall turn the production line into a performance of efficiency! The 'Working Man's Ballet'!"

"**Ichika**," Haruka continued. "You're diligent. Go to the **Laundry Room**. It’s less physically demanding, but it’s a hub for gossip. Everyone talks while they wait for their clothes."

"Got it," Ichika nodded. "I'll listen for anything about the 'Serial Disappearances'."

"**Ena**, **Mafuyu**, and **I** will form the **Investigation Team**," Haruka finished. "We'll skip work today. We need to find Childe. If he's here, he's not in the general population."

"Skip work?" Ena looked relieved. "Thank god. I am not built for mining."

"But we won't get paid," Paimon pointed out.

"We'll rely on the boys to feed us tonight," Haruka smiled sweetly at Tsukasa and Aether. "Don't let us starve."

Tsukasa saluted. "The burden of provision falls upon my shoulders! I shall not fail!"

Location: Production Zone - Lower Level

The heat was intense. Massive gears turned overhead, processing the raw ore mined from the seabed.

"Alright, newbies!" the foreman shouted. "Grab a widget. Attach it to the gadget. Move it to the belt. Repeat until your arms fall off."

"Simple enough!" Tsukasa grabbed a heavy mechanical component.

He lifted it with a grunt. It weighed at least fifty pounds.

"Hah!" Tsukasa slammed it onto the belt. "One!"

Aether worked silently beside him, his movements precise and efficient. He was used to this kind of grind.

"Two!" Tsukasa shouted. "Three!"

"You don't have to count out loud," Aether noted.

"I am establishing a rhythm!" Tsukasa argued, sweat dripping down his nose. "Work without rhythm is just drudgery! Work *with* rhythm is a musical number!"

He grabbed another widget.

"HEAVE! And... HO!"

The other inmates started staring. Some looked annoyed. Others looked amused.

"Hey, loud guy!" an inmate called out. "You got a lot of energy. Bet you burn out by noon."

"I possess the stamina of a supernova!" Tsukasa retorted, picking up *two* widgets at once (thanks to his Geo-enhanced strength). "Watch and learn, citizens! This is how a Star processes industrial waste!"

By lunch, Tsukasa had processed double the quota. He collapsed on a pile of scrap metal, panting.

"My arms..." Tsukasa wheezed. "They are... numb."

"Here," Aether tossed him a pouch of Coupons the foreman had given them. "We're rich. Relatively."

Location: Communal Laundry

The laundry room was humid and smelled of soap and wet wool.

Ichika rolled up her sleeves. She grabbed a washboard and a pile of greasy prisoner uniforms.

Scrub. Scrub. Rinse.

It was repetitive, but calming. The rhythmic sound of water splashing reminded her of a metronome.

She kept her head down, but her ears were open.

Two inmates were whispering near the drying racks.

"...did you hear? Another guy vanished from the South Block."

"Probably 'processed'. Or maybe he went to the pipe."

"The pipe?"

"The Forbidden Zone. They say if you work there... you hear things. Voices in the water."

Ichika scrubbed harder. *Forbidden Zone. Voices.*

"Excuse me," Ichika spoke up, startling them. "I'm new here. What's the Forbidden Zone?"

The inmates looked at her. One of them, a older woman with a scar, narrowed her eyes.

"Curiosity costs Coupons, girl," the woman said. "But I'll give you this one for free. Stay away from the lower pipes. Unless you want to end up like the Harbinger."

"The Harbinger?" Ichika froze. "You mean... Childe? Tartaglia?"

"Yeah. The ginger guy," the woman nodded. "He went down there three days ago. Looking for 'something'. Haven't seen him since."

Location: The Pankration Ring

Haruka, Mafuyu, and Ena wandered the corridors. They checked the canteen, the dorms, and the library. No Childe.

"He isn't here," Mafuyu said, stopping in a hallway. "I can't feel his resonance. It’s faint. Like he is... behind a wall."

"Maybe he's in the fighting ring?" Haruka suggested. "Childe loves to fight. If there's a pit, he's in it."

They found the **Pankration Ring**. It was a brutal arena where inmates fought Meka for Coupons.

"Is he here?" Ena asked, hiding behind Haruka as a robot exploded in the arena.

Haruka scanned the fighters. "No. These are amateurs. Childe would have cleared this ring in five seconds."

"Hey, you three!"

A small, cheerful voice called out from the medical station next to the ring.

A little girl with pink hair, rabbit ears (Melusine features), and a nurse's uniform was waving at them. She held a clipboard that was almost as big as she was.

Sigewinne. The Head Nurse.

"You're the new inmates, right? Cell 404?" Sigewinne beamed. "I'm Sigewinne! I handle the infirmary. You look... remarkably healthy for people who just arrived!"

She looked at Mafuyu. Her smile faltered for a millisecond.

"Oh my," Sigewinne walked up to Mafuyu. She peered into Mafuyu’s eyes. "Your heart rate is very slow. And your pupils... are you sure you're feeling okay? Do you need a milkshake? I make them with extra vitamins!"

"I am fine," Mafuyu said.

"Have you seen a man?" Haruka interrupted politely. "Tall, orange hair, loves violence?"

"Mr. Tartaglia?" Sigewinne tapped her chin with a pen. "Oh, yes! He was here! He beat up three Meka at once! It was very messy. I had to patch him up."

"Where is he now?" Ena asked.

"He left," Sigewinne pointed downward. "He said the 'call' was getting louder. He broke the lock to the **Production Zone Lower Shaft** and jumped in."

"Jumped in?" Haruka frowned. "Where does that lead?"

Sigewinne smiled. It was a cute smile, but her eyes were unreadable.

"To the deep," Sigewinne said. "To the place where the water comes from. You shouldn't go there. It's against the rules."

"We understand," Haruka lied. "Thank you, Nurse."

As they walked away, Mafuyu looked back. Sigewinne was watching them, still smiling.

"She knows," Mafuyu whispered. "She knows we are going to follow him."

Location: Cell 404 (Evening)

The team regrouped in the cell. They pooled their earnings.

"We have 300 Coupons from labor," Aether counted. "And some gossip."

"Childe went to the Lower Shaft," Haruka reported. "He's chasing a 'call'."

"The Forbidden Zone," Ichika added. "The inmates say people disappear there. And they hear voices."

"Voices in the water," Ena shuddered, hugging her knees on the top bunk. "Why does everything in this country involve creepy water?"

"We have to go down there," Tsukasa said, cracking his knuckles (which were covered in bandages from the work). "If the villain has descended into the dungeon, the heroes must follow!"

"But we need access," Haruka said. "We can't just break the lock like Childe. We'll get caught."

"Maybe we don't need to break it," Aether held up a flyer he had found. "The **Pankration Tournament**. The winner gets a 'Special Permit' from the Duke."

"A tournament?" Tsukasa’s eyes lit up. "A battle of strength and showmanship?"

"We enter," Aether decided. "We win. We get the permit. And then... we find Childe."

Chapter 136: Chapter 107: The Ring and the Ration

Location: Cell 404

"Rule Number 4," Haruka read from a crumpled pamphlet she had acquired from a guard. "**'The use of Visions, Delusions, or any form of Elemental Arts within the Ring is strictly prohibited. Violation results in immediate disqualification and solitary confinement.'**"

She looked up at the group.

"That means no wind blades, no rock shields, and no water whips. It has to be pure physical combat."

"Physical?" Ena worried, looking at Mafuyu. "But Mafuyu... she's a caster. She uses a book. Can she even throw a punch?"

"I do not need to punch," Mafuyu said calmly, adjusting her gloves. "I just need to not be hit. And when they overextend... I trip them."

"We need to split the brackets," Aether said. "There's a Male Division and a Female Division for the preliminaries."

"I'll take the Female Division," Mafuyu volunteered.

"I'll take the Male," Aether nodded.

"And what of us?" Tsukasa asked, pointing to himself and Ichika. "Do we cheer from the stands?"

"We work," Ichika said, lifting her heavy work gloves. "Entry fees cost Coupons. And food costs Coupons. If Aether and Mafuyu are fighting, we need to support them."

"A noble backstage role!" Tsukasa declared. "Very well! Hoshino, today you graduate from the Laundry Room. Welcome... to **Production**!"

Location: Production Zone - Lower Level

The heat hit them the moment the elevator doors opened. It was a cacophony of grinding gears, hissing steam, and shouting foremen.

"Alright, newbie," the Foreman grunted, pointing to a pile of raw, unrefined ore chunks the size of watermelons. "Processing line. Move these to the crusher. Don't drop them on your toes."

Ichika stared at the pile. It was massive.

"Lift with your legs!" Tsukasa instructed, stepping up beside her. He grabbed a chunk of ore. "Observe! A wide stance! Engage the core! And... HEAVE!"

He slammed the ore onto the conveyor belt.

"Rhythm, Hoshino! Find the rhythm!"

Ichika nodded. She took a breath. She imagined the beat of a drum.

One. Grip. Two. Lift. Three. Throw.

She grabbed a rock. It was heavy, rough, and hot. But her training with the **Whiteblind** claymore had conditioned her arms. The Geo resonance in her blood hummed, lending her stability.

"Hah!" Ichika threw it.

"Excellent form!" Tsukasa praised, working the station next to her. "You are a natural! Just remember to pace yourself! The show is a marathon, not a sprint!"

For four hours, they worked. It was grueling. Sweat soaked their uniforms. The dust coated their throats.

By the time the lunch whistle blew, Ichika was trembling. Her arms felt like lead.

"I... I can't move," Ichika wheezed, leaning against a pillar.

"You did well," Tsukasa panted, wiping grime from his face. "Come. To the cafeteria. We must refuel."

Location: Coupon Cafeteria

They collapsed at a table. They had enough coupons for a slightly better meal—actual meat and rice—but they were too tired to eat.

"You two look terrible."

A cheerful voice piped up.

Sigewinne, the Head Nurse, stood by their table. She was holding a tray with two glasses of a bubbling, purple liquid.

"Nurse Sigewinne?" Ichika blinked sluggishly.

"I monitor all the new inmates," Sigewinne smiled sweetly, her bunny ears twitching. "Production Zone is hard on the first day. Your muscles are accumulating lactic acid at an alarming rate."

She pushed the glasses toward them.

"Here! A special nutritional shake! It will restore your stamina instantly!"

Tsukasa looked at the purple sludge. It smelled like... onions and old socks.

"Is this... safe for human consumption?" Tsukasa asked warily.

"It's medicine!" Sigewinne beamed. "Drink up! Or do you want to collapse during the afternoon shift?"

Tsukasa and Ichika exchanged a look. They plugged their noses.

Gulp.

"GAAAAH!" Tsukasa choked. "IT TASTES LIKE DESPAIR!"

"It's... spicy?" Ichika coughed, tears streaming down her eyes. "Why is it spicy?!"

But a second later, the warmth spread through their bodies. The ache in their arms vanished. The fog in their brains cleared.

"Whoa," Ichika flexed her hand. "I feel... energized."

"Incredible!" Tsukasa stood up. "A miracle potion! Thank you, Nurse!"

"You're welcome!" Sigewinne giggled. Her eyes lingered on them for a moment—calculating, observing. "You two work very hard for your friends. That's nice to see down here. Don't break yourselves, okay?"

She hopped away, humming a tune.

"She is... terrifyingly effective," Tsukasa noted. "Now! Back to work! We must earn the entry fee!"

Location: The Pankration Ring

While Tsukasa and Ichika grinded for coupons, the fights began.

"Next match! **The Golden Traveler** versus **The Iron Crusher**!"

Aether stepped into the ring. His opponent was a massive man with steel gauntlets.

Without elements, Aether relied on pure swordsmanship (or in this case, a blunt training sword provided by the arena). He moved fast, parrying the heavy blows, weaving through the crusher’s guard.

Whack.

A precise strike to the ribs. The crusher went down.

"Winner! The Traveler!"

"Next match! **The Silent Shadow** versus **Viper**!"

Mafuyu stepped into the ring. She wasn't wearing her mask, but her expression was just as unreadable. Her opponent was a wiry man with a knife (blunted for the ring).

"No magic, little girl," Viper sneered, circling her. "What are you gonna do? Cry?"

He lunged.

Mafuyu didn't blink. She watched his shoulder.

‘Too much weight on the front foot.’

She stepped aside. Just a tiny, minimal movement. Viper slashed empty air.

As he stumbled past her, Mafuyu stuck her foot out.

Trip.

Viper crashed face-first into the metal floor.

He scrambled up, angry. "You got lucky!"

He swung a wild haymaker. Mafuyu ducked. She grabbed his wrist, using his own momentum to spin him around. She didn't have the strength to throw him, so she simply kicked the back of his knee.

Buckle.

Viper fell to his knees. Mafuyu placed her hand on his throat. She didn't squeeze. She just looked at him with those dead, purple eyes.

"Yield," Mafuyu said quietly.

Viper looked into her eyes. He saw something that scared him more than a fist. He saw absolutely nothing.

"I yield! I yield!"

"Winner! The Silent Shadow!"

Haruka, watching from the stands with Ena, let out a breath.

"She’s good," Haruka noted. "She fights like she doesn't care if she gets hurt. That makes her dangerous."

"She fights like she's bored," Ena shivered.

Location: Cell 404 (Evening)

The team reunited. Tsukasa and Ichika dumped a large bag of Coupons on the table.

"Five hundred coupons!" Tsukasa announced proudly. "Enough for the entry fee and a celebratory dinner!"

"We qualified," Aether said, nursing a bruised arm. "We're in the main bracket."

"Mafuyu was scary," Paimon whispered. "She didn't even get hit."

"We are one step closer," Haruka said. "To the Duke. And to Childe."

Ichika looked at her hands. They were calloused from the work, but strong.

"We can do this," Ichika smiled.

Chapter 137: Chapter 108: The Duke’s Game

Location: The Pankration Ring - Preparation Area

The air in the arena was electric. Inmates banged on the metal railings, chanting names of their favorite fighters. The prelims were over; the main bracket was about to begin.

Mafuyu stood in the shadows near the locker rooms, adjusting her gloves. She wasn't nervous. She was watching.

Near the VIP entrance, **Sigewinne** was talking to a group of Gardemeks and human staff. She was giggling, handing out small vials of colorful liquid to the guards.

Mafuyu narrowed her eyes.

She had seen Melusines in the Court of Fontaine. Like Elphane on the Aquabus, or the officers on patrol. They were distinct—animalistic features, unique movements.

But Sigewinne...

Sigewinne moved like a human. Her expressions were perfectly mirrored to human emotion. Her hands were remarkably... dexterous.

‘She is different,’ Mafuyu thought. *‘The other Melusines are naturally kind. She is... performing kindness.’*

Mafuyu watched Sigewinne’s smile. It didn't waver for a second. It was a perfect mask.

‘She is dangerous.’

Mafuyu turned away, heading to the warm-up benches. She would not press further. Not yet.

Location: Production Zone - Upper Level

Meanwhile, **Tsukasa** and **Ichika** were clocking out.

"Another shift complete!" Tsukasa announced, wiping grease from his cheek. "My muscles are screaming, but my spirit is singing! We have contributed to the economy of the deep!"

"We're getting faster," Ichika noted, flexing her arm. The heavy lifting was becoming easier. "I think I can lift two crates at once now."

"Excellent progress!" Tsukasa beamed. "Now, to the arena! We must support our fighters!"

They walked down the corridor connecting the Production Zone to the Dormitories. To get there, they had to pass the **Infirmary**.

Usually, the infirmary was quiet. But today...

Gurgle. Hiss.

A strange sound drifted through the heavy metal door. It sounded like liquid bubbling through pipes, accompanied by a low, rhythmic mechanical thrum.

Tsukasa stopped. "Hoshino. Do you hear that?"

"It sounds like... chemistry?" Ichika frowned.

"Or a plot twist!" Tsukasa whispered dramatically. "The nurse said she makes 'special shakes'. What if the secret ingredient is... suspicious?"

"We shouldn't snoop," Ichika said, though she stepped closer to the door. The curiosity—and the fear of what happened to Teppei—pushed her forward. "But... if they are making something like Delusions..."

"We must investigate!" Tsukasa decided.

They crept up to the door. There was a small, circular glass porthole. It was frosted, but they could see shadows moving inside. Purple light flickered.

Tsukasa stood on his tiptoes to peek. Ichika crouched to listen at the seam.

"I see... tubes," Tsukasa whispered. "And... is that a giant syringe?"

"I hear humming," Ichika noted. "A happy song."

The humming stopped.

Click.

The door handle turned.

"Gah!" Tsukasa scrambled back, tripping over his own feet. Ichika jumped back, raising her fists instinctively.

The heavy door swung open.

Sigewinne stood there.

She wasn't holding a weapon. She was holding a clipboard and a very large, very sharp needle.

She smiled. It was the sweetest, most terrifying smile they had ever seen.

"Oh my!" Sigewinne chirped, her bunny ears twitching. "Visitors? During procedure hours?"

She looked at Tsukasa, who was on the floor. She looked at Ichika, who was sweating.

"Are you two feeling unwell?" Sigewinne asked, tilting her head. Her eyes scanned them with clinical precision. "Do you need a checkup? I have a new batch of vitamins that need... testing."

"V-Vitamins?" Tsukasa stammered, looking at the purple liquid inside the syringe.

"Or perhaps you are here to volunteer?" Sigewinne stepped closer. "We are always looking for subjects to help us understand the effects of... long-term darkness on the human psyche."

The way she said 'subjects' made Ichika’s blood run cold.

"No!" Ichika blurted out, grabbing Tsukasa’s collar and hauling him up. "We're fine! We were just... lost! Wrong turn!"

"We are heading to the arena!" Tsukasa added frantically. "To watch the violence! Goodbye, Nurse!"

"Oh, what a shame," Sigewinne lowered the needle. "Well, if you ever feel... tired... you know where to find me."

She waved.

Tsukasa and Ichika didn't walk away. They speed-walked.

As they turned the corner, Ichika glanced back. Sigewinne was still standing in the doorway, watching them.

"She knows," Ichika whispered. "She definitely knows."

"That nurse," Tsukasa shuddered. "She has the aura of a villain who reveals their plan only after the hero is strapped to the table! We must never get sick down here, Hoshino! Never!"

Location: The Pankration Ring

They arrived at the arena just as the announcer’s voice boomed over the speakers.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! CRIMINALS AND GUARDS!"

"WELCOME TO THE MAIN EVENT!"

Wriothesley sat in the VIP box above, watching with a bored expression. Beside him, Sigewinne (who had seemingly teleported there) appeared, hopping onto a seat and taking out a notepad.

"Did you find any rats, Head Nurse?" Wriothesley asked quietly.

"Just two curious mice," Sigewinne giggled. "They're cute. But they're sniffing around the pantry."

Wriothesley smirked.

"Let them sniff. It makes the game more interesting."

Down in the ring, Aether and Mafuyu stood ready.

"First Match! The Golden Traveler VS The Fortress Champion!"

Chapter 138: Chapter 109: The Voices in the Pipes

Location: The Pankration Ring

The crowd roared, the sound echoing off the metal walls of the underwater prison.

"And now! The final round of the Group C Brackets!" the announcer bellowed. "**The Golden Traveler and The Silent Shadow** versus **The Iron Twin-Gears**!"

Two massive inmates clad in makeshift scrap-metal armor charged forward, swinging heavy wrenches.

"They are slow," Mafuyu noted calmly.

"I'll take the left," Aether said, raising his training sword. "You take the right."

The first opponent swung a wrench at Mafuyu’s head. She didn't block. She didn't even blink. She simply stepped one inch to the left.

The wrench whooshed past her ear.

Before the man could recover, Mafuyu grabbed his extended arm. She used his own momentum, pivoting on her heel and driving her shoulder into his solar plexus.

THUD.

The massive man wheezed, the air knocked out of him. Mafuyu swept his leg, sending him crashing to the floor with a heavy metallic clang.

On the other side, Aether parried a strike, spun, and delivered a precise kick to his opponent’s helmet, knocking him out cold.

"Down goes the Iron Gears!" the announcer screamed. "The winners are the newcomers!"

Aether helped Mafuyu up (though she wasn't even winded). The crowd cheered, throwing Coupons into the ring.

High above in the VIP box, **Wriothesley** clapped lazily. Beside him, **Sigewinne** leaned over the railing.

She wasn't cheering. She was smiling that same, sweet, clinical smile.

"Her heart rate didn't even increase," Sigewinne murmured, clicking her pen. "No adrenaline spike. No fear response. It’s like watching a machine process a task."

She looked at Mafuyu’s blank face.

"Fascinating," Sigewinne giggled. "I wonder what happens if we apply... pressure?"

Location: Production Zone - Valve Sector

While the fight raged, Tsukasa and Ichika were knee-deep in grease.

"Turn the valve, Hoshino!" Tsukasa grunted, straining against a rusted wheel. "We must ensure the hydraulic flow is optimal for the... whatever this machine does!"

"I'm turning!" Ichika pushed, her muscles burning.

Creak. Hiss.

The valve turned. Steam vented from the pipe.

"Excellent work!" Tsukasa wiped oil from his nose. "We have conquered the plumbing! Now, let us take a brief intermission."

They sat down behind a stack of crates to drink their water.

As they rested, hushed voices drifted from the maintenance tunnel nearby. Two inmates were huddled together, looking terrified.

"...I'm telling you, I saw it," one inmate whispered. "The water in the **Forbidden Zone**. It wasn't the usual dark bilge water."

"Shut up," the other hissed. "You want the guards to hear?"

"It was glowing," the first inmate insisted, his voice shaking. "A bright, **shimmering blue**. Like... like the ocean under the moonlight, but brighter. And it smelled... salty. Like pure salt."

"Glowing water?"

"And I heard... crying. Coming from the pipes. Like people dissolving."

Ichika froze. *Shimmering blue water. Salty smell. People dissolving.*

"Primordial Seawater," Ichika whispered to Tsukasa, her face paling. "It matches the description from the Opera House."

Tsukasa’s eyes widened. He stood up, stepping out from behind the crates.

"You there!" Tsukasa announced, pointing a gloved finger. "Citizens! This shimmering water you speak of—where exactly did you see it?!"

The inmates jumped. They saw Tsukasa’s intense expression (and his weird scarf).

"Guard!" one of them yelled. "Snitches!"

They scrambled up and ran, vanishing down the dark corridors of the lower levels before Tsukasa could pursue.

"Wait!" Tsukasa shouted. "I merely require exposition!"

"They're gone," Ichika said, standing up. "But we heard enough. The water in the Forbidden Zone... it's rising. Just like the prophecy."

"We have to tell Aether," Tsukasa said grimly. "The stage is set for a disaster."

Location: The Locker Rooms

Aether and Mafuyu were wiping off sweat (mostly Aether) when the door banged open.

"Success!" Tsukasa burst in. "And also, imminent doom!"

"We have intel," Ichika said, closing the door behind them. "The workers are talking. The water in the Forbidden Zone—the pipes below the factory—it's turning red."

"Red?" Aether frowned. "Like blood?"

"Like the stuff in the Fonta bottle," Haruka realized, stepping out from the shadows where she had been guarding their gear. "The Primordial Sea is leaking."

"That explains why Childe went down there," Mafuyu said. "He sensed it. The Abyss... and the Sea... they are connected."

"And Sigewinne knows," Ichika added. "She was watching us near the infirmary. She acts nice, but she's guarding something."

"We have the invite," Aether held up a golden ticket he had received for winning the match. "Dinner with the Duke. Tonight."

"Dinner?" Ena asked.

"It’s our chance," Haruka said. "While Aether distracts the Duke... we sneak into the pipes."

"The Forbidden Zone," Tsukasa adjusted his coat. "A descent into the underbelly of the stage! It is dangerous! It is reckless! It is... perfect!"

"We go tonight," Aether decided. "Before the water rises any higher."

Chapter 139: Chapter 110A-1: The Wolf’s Dinner

Chapter Notes

we're doing split chapters again

FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUU

Location: The Duke’s Office - Private Dining Area
Time: 19:00 (Night Cycle)

The table was set with surprising elegance for a prison. Roast duck, heavy bread, and a pot of black tea that smelled of bergamot and oil.

Wriothesley sat at the head of the table. He wasn't wearing his coat. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing the heavy gauntlets he never seemed to take off.

"Eat," Wriothesley said, slicing a piece of meat. "The kitchen staff outdid themselves tonight. It’s not often we host celebrities."

Aether sat to his right, **Paimon** hovering nervously beside him. **Mafuyu** sat to his left, staring at her plate. **Ena** sat next to Mafuyu, gripping her fork like a weapon.

"Thank you for the invitation," Aether said, keeping his voice steady. "It’s... better than the Welfare Meal."

"Everything is better than the Welfare Meal," Wriothesley chuckled. He took a bite, chewed slowly, and then looked at the three empty chairs at the end of the table.

"It’s a shame the others couldn't make it," Wriothesley noted. "Mr. Tenma seemed the type to enjoy a free meal. And the Idol... Miss Kiritani? She strikes me as someone who appreciates formalities."

Ena flinched. She opened her mouth to make an excuse, but Mafuyu spoke first.

"They are tired," Mafuyu said flatly, cutting her meat with surgical precision. "The tournament was exhausting. Tsukasa-senpai strained his vocal cords shouting at the crowd. Ichika and Haruka are attending to him."

"Is that so?" Wriothesley’s grey eyes slid over to Mafuyu. "Resting. In Cell 404?"

"Yes," Aether lied smoothly. "They crashed right after the match."

"Hmm." Wriothesley took a sip of tea. "Strange. My guards reported seeing movement near the lower production lift. But I suppose shadows play tricks in the deep."

Ena's heart hammered against her ribs. *'He knows. He definitely knows.'*

"So," Wriothesley changed the subject, leaning back. "Let's talk about you. The 'Anomalies'."

He pointed a fork at **Ena**.

"You. The Artist. When you arrived, my scanner picked up zero elemental resonance. You were as blank as a sheet of paper. But today... you smell like Hydro."

Ena froze. She looked at her hand, remembering the sensation at the statue.

"I... I resonated," Ena stammered. "With the Statue of the Seven."

"Without a Vision," Wriothesley finished. "Just like the Traveler."

He looked at Aether.

"I've read the files from Sumeru. And Liyue. You people walk into a nation, touch a statue, and suddenly you wield the elements better than people who trained for decades."

He leaned forward, the playful smile vanishing.

"What *are* you?"

The air in the room grew heavy. Paimon hid behind Aether's hair.

"We are travelers," Aether said, his golden eyes hardening. "We're just looking for answers."

"Answers about what?" Wriothesley pressed. "About your lost sibling? Or about the prophecy that says we're all going to dissolve?"

"Both," Mafuyu said.

Wriothesley looked at her.

"You interest me the most," the Duke admitted. "The Traveler fights with skill. The Artist fights with panic. But you... you fight like a machine."

He tapped the table.

"Sigewinne told me about your checkup. She said your heart rate is unnaturally slow. And your pain tolerance... it isn't bravery. It's absence."

Mafuyu stopped eating. She looked up at the Duke.

"Is that a crime in Fontaine?" Mafuyu asked. "To be empty?"

"No," Wriothesley smirked. "It's a survival trait. Especially down here."

He poured himself more tea.

"You know, the water down here... it’s changing. The pipes in the Forbidden Zone used to carry waste. Now... they carry something else."

He looked at Aether.

"Something salty. Metallic. Like blood mixed with the ocean."

Aether stiffened. "You know about the Primordial Sea leak?"

"I am the Warden," Wriothesley said simply. "I know everything that flows through my fortress. I know the water is rising. I know the sluice gate is holding back a tide that could swallow this prison whole."

He stood up, walking to the window that looked out into the underwater abyss.

"I also know that **Childe** went looking for the source. And he hasn't come back."

He turned around, his eyes locking onto Aether’s.

"So, tell me, Traveler. If your friends aren't in Cell 404 sleeping... where are they really?"

Ena dropped her fork. It clattered loudly on the plate.

"I..." Ena looked at Aether, panic in her eyes.

"Don't answer that," Wriothesley interrupted, holding up a hand. "If you tell me, I have to arrest them for trespassing in a restricted zone. And that would ruin dessert."

He sat back down, smiling that dangerous, wolfish smile.

"Let's just say... I hope they are good swimmers."

Chapter 140: Chapter 110B-1: The Pipes of the Forbidden Zone

Location: Production Zone - Lower Shaft Entrance

The dinner with the Duke was a distraction. The real show was happening here, in the shadows of the industrial sector.

Tsukasa, **Haruka**, and **Ichika** stood before the heavy maintenance hatch that Childe had allegedly broken through days ago. It had been hastily welded shut by the guards, but the weld was sloppy.

"It looks sealed," Ichika whispered, checking the hallway for patrols.

"A seal is merely a stage direction waiting to be rewritten!" Tsukasa declared (in a stage whisper). He placed his hand on the metal. **"Hydro Jet!"**

A high-pressure stream of water blasted from his palm, cutting through the fresh weld like a laser. The metal hissed and popped.

"Good," Haruka grabbed the wheel. "Ichika, help me pull."

With a groan of protesting metal, the hatch swung open. A blast of hot, humid air rushed out, smelling of rust and something far older—salt.

"Into the abyss," Haruka said, turning on a portable lamp. "Stay close."

Location: The Abandoned Sector

The tunnels below were a maze of pipes and dripping water. Bioluminescent moss coated the walls, casting everything in a sickly green light.

"It’s quiet," Ichika noted, gripping her claymore. "Too quiet."

"Hehehe..."

A dry, scratching laugh echoed from a pile of scrap metal in the corner.

Tsukasa jumped. "Who goes there?! Show yourself, phantom of the opera!"

A head popped up from behind a rusted boiler. It was an old man, his skin gray from lack of sun, his eyes wild and milky. He wore a prisoner uniform that looked decades old.

Old Man Clyne.

"Phantom?" Clyne cackled. "No phantoms here. Only the water. The hungry water."

"An inmate?" Haruka stepped forward, spear ready but non-threatening. "Sir, we are looking for someone. A tall man with orange hair. A Harbinger."

"The Ginger?" Clyne spat. "He went through. He paid the toll."

"Toll?" Tsukasa patted his pocket. "We have Coupons! Fresh from the tournament!"

He held out a handful of metal tickets.

Clyne scrambled forward, snatching them with greedy, trembling hands. "Metal! Shiny metal for the surface! Yes, yes..."

He pointed a crooked finger down a narrow, slime-covered pipe that led deeper into the earth.

"He went that way. Toward the **Sluice Gate**. But you shouldn't go. The water... it sings."

"It sings?" Ichika shivered.

"It sings of melting," Clyne whispered, his eyes widening. "It wants to hug you until you aren't you anymore. The Ginger... he jumped right into the song. Crazy. He wanted to fight the whale."

"Whale?" Haruka frowned. "There are no whales in a pipe."

"Just go," Clyne hissed, retreating back into his scrap pile. "Go before the water notices you."

Location: The Pipeline

They squeezed through the narrow pipe. It was claustrophobic. Water sloshed around their ankles, rising steadily.

"Look," Ichika pointed.

Attached to the walls of the pipe were strange creatures. Glowing, armored crabs and blubberbeasts.

"Fontemer Aberrants," Haruka recognized them from the harbor. "But... they shouldn't be down here. These are deep-sea creatures."

"The ecosystem is leaking," Tsukasa noted grimly. "The barrier between the ocean and the prison is failing."

The pipe opened up into a massive, flooded cylindrical chamber. The water here wasn't ankle-deep. It was a pool, dark and bottomless.

"The path continues underwater," Haruka shone her light down. "We have to swim."

"Swim?" Tsukasa paled. "In *that*? We do not have diving gear! And Ena is not here to hyperventilate for us!"

"We have to try," Ichika said, looking at the dark water. "If Childe went this way... we have to follow."

"But Childe is a warrior," Tsukasa argued. "He has a Vision!"

"No," Haruka corrected, her eyes widening in realization. "He doesn't."

She looked at the dark water.

"He gave his Vision to Mafuyu before he disappeared. He said it was 'acting up'. That means he went down here... defenseless. Without his Hydro power."

Silence fell over the group. The idea of the battle-hungry Harbinger diving into the abyss without his primary weapon was terrifying.

"If he risked it with nothing but his bare hands," Haruka tightened her gloves. "Then we have no excuse. We have our Resonance."

"Let's test it," Haruka said. She dipped her hand in the water. It felt... strange. Not cold. Energizing.

"On the count of three," Haruka said. "Deep breath."

"One. Two. Three."

They jumped.

SPLASH.

Location: Underwater Channel

The water engulfed them. Ichika squeezed her eyes shut, holding her breath, waiting for the pressure to crush her lungs.

But it didn't happen.

She felt... light.

She opened her eyes. Her vision was clear. The water wasn't blurry; it was sharp, high-definition. She saw Haruka floating next to her, hair drifting like seaweed. She saw Tsukasa flailing his legs.

Ichika opened her mouth to scream—

"Are you okay?"

The bubbles didn't stop the sound. Her voice carried perfectly through the water.

Ichika gasped. She inhaled.

Water rushed into her lungs... but she didn't drown. It felt like breathing air, just heavier.

"We..." Tsukasa stared at his hands. "We are breathing! We are aquatic! Is this the power of the Hydro Statue?!"

"It’s the **Transoceanic Source**," Haruka realized, doing a graceful backflip in the water. "The blessing of Fontaine. It lets people move underwater without gear. We resonated with it."

"This is fantastic!" Tsukasa cheered, spinning in circles. "I am a mermaid! A merman! A siren of the deep!"

"Focus," Haruka commanded, pointing down. "The current is pulling that way. Toward the gate."

They swam deeper. The bioluminescence faded. The water grew darker, colder.

Then, they saw it.

Ahead of them, looming out of the gloom, was a massive, circular metal door. The **Sluice Gate**.

It was huge, covered in warning signs and heavy locks.

But the door wasn't the problem.

The water around the door was glowing. Not blue.

It was glowing **Pink**. A sickly, neon pink that pulsed like a heartbeat.

"That color," Ichika whispered, her voice trembling in the water. "It's... it's like the Fonta."

"Primordial Seawater," Haruka realized. "It’s leaking through the seal."

Suddenly, the water pressure spiked.

BOOM.

A shockwave hit them. It wasn't an explosion. It was a heartbeat from behind the gate.

"Whale..."

A sound—low, mournful, and terrifyingly loud—vibrated through the water. It wasn't a machine. It was a creature.

The Sluice Gate groaned. The metal began to buckle inward.

"It’s breaking!" Tsukasa yelled. "The door is breaking!"

"We have to reinforce it!" Ichika swam forward, raising her sword.

But then, the pink water surged. A cloud of the Primordial Sea rushed toward them like a mist of blood.

"Don't touch it!" Haruka screamed. "If that touches us—"

The cloud expanded, swallowing the light.

Chapter 141: Chapter 111: The Rising Tide

Location: The Forbidden Zone - Underwater Channel

The cloud of pink, glowing Primordial Seawater surged forward like a living thing. It wasn't just water; it was erasure.

"Back!" Haruka screamed, her voice bubbling in the water. She grabbed Ichika, kicking desperately against the current.

But the suction was too strong. The Sluice Gate was buckling, pulling them toward the leak.

Whoosh.

Something fast streaked past them. A figure in a heavy diving helmet and a suit built for deep-pressure survival.

Freminet.

He didn't speak. He moved with the silent efficiency of a predator. He deployed his mechanical penguin, **Pers**.

Beep-Beep!

Pers shot forward, releasing a pressurized pulse of Cryo energy. It didn't freeze the Primordial Sea—that was impossible—but it froze the *normal* water around the leak, creating a temporary ice plug over the buckling metal.

The suction stopped.

Freminet grabbed Tsukasa by the back of his coat. He signaled to Haruka and Ichika: *Up. Now.*

They didn't argue. They followed the diver, kicking frantically toward the surface light of the maintenance shaft.

Location: Production Zone - Maintenance Hatch

They broke the surface, gasping for air.

"We... *huff*... we survived!" Tsukasa scrambled onto the metal grating, coughing up water. "The ocean tried to eat us! But the Star refused to be digested!"

"That was close," Ichika wheezed, pulling Haruka up.

Freminet climbed out last. He removed his helmet, shaking his wet hair. He looked at them with wide, anxious eyes.

"You shouldn't be down there," Freminet whispered. "That water... my suit's sensors were screaming. High toxicity."

"Thank you," Haruka bowed, dripping wet. "You saved us, Freminet."

"I... I just heard the pipes groaning," Freminet mumbled, looking away shyly. "I thought it was a leak. I didn't expect... people."

"Well, you found the main cast!" Tsukasa declared, standing up and wringing out his scarf. "Now, we must report this to—"

Click.

The sound of a hammer cocking back on a pistol echoed in the silent tunnel.

Tsukasa froze.

Standing at the end of the walkway, blocking the only exit, was a woman in a duelist's uniform. She held a pistol in one hand and a sword in the other. Her expression was stone cold.

Clorinde.

"Going somewhere?" Clorinde asked.

"Ah," Tsukasa raised his hands slowly. "We are... busted."

"Trespassing in a Restricted Zone," Clorinde stated, walking forward. Her heels rang against the metal. "Tampering with critical infrastructure. And... soaking wet."

"We were inspecting the plumbing!" Tsukasa improvised wildly. "The pipes were making a tragic sound! As good citizens, we investigated!"

"Save it for the Duke," Clorinde holstered her pistol. "He's waiting for you. All of you."

Location: The Duke's Office

The door opened. Clorinde marched the dripping wet "Pipe Investigation Team" (plus Freminet) into the office.

Wriothesley was sitting on the edge of his desk, arms crossed. **Aether**, **Mafuyu**, and **Ena** were already there, looking relieved to see their friends alive.

"You look terrible," Ena noted, looking at Tsukasa's sodden coat.

"It was a very moist adventure," Tsukasa admitted.

"Report," Wriothesley ordered, looking at Clorinde.

"Found them coming out of the Lower Shaft," Clorinde said. "Along with the Diver."

"We found the leak," Haruka stepped forward, ignoring the water pooling around her boots. "The Sluice Gate is failing. The water behind it... it's pink. It's Primordial Seawater."

Wriothesley's expression didn't change, but the temperature in the room seemed to drop.

"So it's true," Wriothesley sighed. "The sluice gate is the only thing keeping the Fortress—and the rest of Fontaine—from dissolving."

"Freminet plugged it with ice," Ichika added. "But it won't hold forever."

The door to the office burst open again.

Lyney and **Lynette** rushed in. They ignored Wriothesley. They ignored the Traveler. They ran straight to **Freminet**.

"Freminet!" Lyney grabbed his brother's shoulders. "We heard you went into the pipe! Are you crazy?!"

"I'm fine," Freminet shrank back slightly. "I just... helped them."

"You could have dissolved!" Lynette scolded, her usual monotone cracking with emotion. She hugged him. "Don't scare us like that."

"I'm sorry," Freminet whispered.

"Oh my," a cheerful voice came from the corner.

Sigewinne hopped off a chair. She walked over to the wet group, holding a medical scanner.

"Pink water?" Sigewinne asked, scanning Ichika. "Did any of you touch it?"

"We swam in it," Tsukasa admitted.

Sigewinne blinked. She looked at Wriothesley.

"Your Grace," Sigewinne said, her smile vanishing for the first time since they met her. "If they swam in Primordial Seawater... they should be puddles. But their vitals are stable."

"Because they aren't from here," Wriothesley concluded. "They aren't Fontainian. The prophecy doesn't apply to them."

He looked at Freminet.

"But *you* are, kid. You got lucky. Extremely lucky."

Freminet paled. He realized how close he had come to death.

"So," Wriothesley stood up. He looked at the assembled group—Fatui, Travelers, Outlanders, and Duelists.

"We have a leak that can kill a nation. We have a prophecy coming true. And we have a prison full of people sitting on a ticking bomb."

He picked up his teacup.

"I think it's time we stop playing inmates and guards. We need to fix that gate. Permanently."

"How?" Aether asked.

"There is a mechanism," Wriothesley said. "Deep in the core. But to reach it... we'll need divers. And engineers."

He looked at Tsukasa and Haruka.

"And maybe... a little bit of that 'stage magic' you're so fond of."

Chapter 142: Chapter 112: The Mask of the Nurse

Location: The Duke’s Office

The atmosphere in the office was a mix of relief and damp wool. **Sigewinne** was bustling around **Freminet**, checking his vitals with a stethoscope while **Tsukasa** and **Ichika** wrung out their clothes in a bucket provided by Clorinde.

"Heart rate stabilizing," Sigewinne chirped, patting Freminet’s knee. "You were very brave, little diver! A sticker for you!"

She stuck a cute sticker on his helmet. Freminet blushed, hiding his face.

Wriothesley leaned against his desk, watching them. He looked calm, but his eyes were calculating the damage to the sluice gate.

"Duke," a quiet voice spoke from his left.

Wriothesley turned. **Mafuyu** was standing there. She wasn't looking at her friends; she was looking at Sigewinne across the room.

"Something on your mind, Miss Asahina?" Wriothesley asked.

"The nurse," Mafuyu said. Her voice was low enough that the others couldn't hear over Tsukasa’s complaints about wet socks. "She is... strange."

Wriothesley raised an eyebrow. "Sigewinne? She’s the best medic in the Fortress. A bit eccentric, maybe, but—"

"It isn't eccentricity," Mafuyu interrupted. "It is a performance."

She looked Wriothesley in the eye.

"During the Pankration match... I felt her watching me. Her aura... it didn't match her expression. She was smiling, but the feeling around her was... clinical. Detached."

Wriothesley crossed his arms. "Go on."

"I have seen Melusines in the Court," Mafuyu continued. "They are different. They move differently. They speak differently. But Sigewinne... she moves like a human. She speaks like a human. She looks... half-human."

Mafuyu paused.

"But that feels wrong. Biology does not work like that naturally. It feels... constructed. Like she is wearing a mask of humanity over something else."

Wriothesley went still. The playful smirk vanished from his face. He looked at this girl—this empty, Visionless girl—who had been in his prison for less than a week.

"You think she's fake?" Wriothesley asked, his voice dangerously soft.

"I think she is trying very hard to be something she isn't," Mafuyu said. "She mimics human empathy perfectly. Too perfectly. It makes me wonder... what is she hiding underneath?"

She looked at Sigewinne again.

'Is she like me?' Mafuyu thought. *'Does she mimic kindness because she doesn't understand it? Or because she fears what she really is?'*

"I have a theory," Mafuyu said. "About her origin. But... I lack the foundational data to support it. So I will stop there."

Wriothesley stared at her. He let out a short, impressed breath.

"You have sharp eyes, Mafuyu," Wriothesley murmured. "You cracked a code in three days that most people don't see in three years."

He glanced at the Head Nurse.

"She isn't malicious. But you're right. She has her reasons for the way she looks. And the way she acts. Keep your theories to yourself for now. The Fortress has enough secrets."

"Understood," Mafuyu nodded. "That is all."

She walked back to the group.

Behind the door of the medical cabinet, **Sigewinne** stood frozen. She had been reaching for a bandage, but her hand had stopped mid-air. Her rabbit ears were flattened against her head.

She had heard everything.

Her reflection in the glass cabinet showed a cute, smiling girl. But for the first time, the smile wavered.

'She saw it,' Sigewinne thought, a tremor of genuine fear running through her. *'She saw the seams in the costume. Who is this girl?'*

The Ark

"Alright," Wriothesley clapped his hands, drawing everyone's attention (and snapping Sigewinne out of her panic). "Everyone is dry? Breathing? Good."

He walked to the back of the office. He pulled a lever hidden behind a bookshelf.

RUMBLE.

The floor in the center of the room began to open. A hidden elevator shaft was revealed.

"The sluice gate is a temporary fix," Wriothesley said grimly. "Freminet's ice won't hold forever. And when the Primordial Sea rises... this entire prison will become a tomb."

"So we evacuate?" Aether asked.

"We can't evacuate the prisoners to the surface. The Court won't take them. And there isn't enough time," Wriothesley explained. "So... I built a Plan B."

He stepped onto the lift.

"Follow me."

They descended past the production zone, past the jagged rocks, into the deepest, darkest cavern of the Fortress.

Lights flickered on, revealing a massive, dry-docked structure.

It was a ship. But not like the Alcor or the steamboats of the Court. It was immense, armored with heavy steel plating, shaped like a massive wing. It looked like it could survive the end of the world.

"Behold," Wriothesley gestured. "**The Wingalet**."

"It's... gigantic," Tsukasa gasped, tilting his head back. "A ship built underground? How will you launch it?"

"When the prophecy comes true," Wriothesley said, his voice echoing in the cavern. "When the water rises and dissolves the land... this ship will float. It will carry everyone in the Fortress to safety."

"An Ark," Haruka realized. "You built an Ark."

"I call it insurance," Wriothesley shrugged. "But the engine isn't finished. And the hull needs reinforcement against the Primordial acidity."

He looked at the troupe.

"You said you were the 'Teyvat Expedition Team'? Well, I'm hiring you. Help me finish this ship. And in exchange... I'll help you find the truth about the Prophecy."

"We're in," Ichika said immediately. "We can help with the heavy lifting."

"And the engineering!" Tsukasa added. "I have experience with prop construction!"

"This isn't a prop, kid," Wriothesley grinned. "This is survival."

As the group marveled at the ship, Sigewinne stood in the back, clutching her clipboard. She looked at Mafuyu, who was staring at the ship's hull.

‘The empty girl,’ Sigewinne thought. *‘I need to be careful around her.’*

Chapter 143: Chapter 113: The Warden’s Letter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Location: The Duke’s Office

The heavy stamp hit the paperwork with a final, authoritative *thud*.

"Congratulations," **Wriothesley** smiled, leaning back in his chair. "You are officially reformed citizens. Your sentence for 'Public Nuisance' has been commuted to time served, citing 'Exemplary Behavior' and 'Community Service'."

"Exemplary behavior?" **Ena** raised an eyebrow. "We broke into your pipes and almost drowned."

"And then you fixed them," Wriothesley winked. "That counts as community service in my book."

He slid the release papers across the desk. **Aether** picked them up.

"You’re letting us go early," **Haruka** noted, her eyes sharp. "Is it because of the gate?"

"Partially," Wriothesley admitted, his expression sobering. "The Ark is coming along, but I can't have civilians—even capable ones—stumbling around the drydock while we weld the hull. It’s a liability."

He reached into his drawer and pulled out a thick envelope. It was sealed with red wax bearing the crest of the Fortress.

"This," Wriothesley said, sliding it to **Aether**, "is for the Chief Justice. Hand-deliver it to **Neuvillette**. Do not open it. Do not lose it."

"What’s in it?" **Tsukasa** leaned in curiously. "A secret plot? A confession of love? The lunch menu?"

"The truth," Wriothesley said cryptically. "About the water levels. About the Whale. And about... **you**."

He looked at **Ichika** and **Mafuyu**.

"The fact that you swam in that water and lived. It proves you are Outlanders in the truest sense. The Prophecy... the dissolving... it doesn't apply to you."

Wriothesley tapped the letter.

"That immunity makes you the only variables this nation has left. But if the people find out there are humans who *can't* dissolve... it will cause panic. Envy. Or worse."

"Understood," Aether tucked the letter into his inventory. "We'll get it to him."

"Well then," Wriothesley stood up, offering a hand. "Get out of my prison. The sun is shining upstairs. Go enjoy it while it lasts."

As they filed out, **Sigewinne** popped out from behind the door.

"Bye-bye!" she waved, holding a syringe. "Make sure to drink plenty of water! But... you know... not the pink kind!"

Mafuyu paused. She looked at the nurse.

"Goodbye, Sigewinne," Mafuyu said evenly.

Sigewinne’s smile didn't falter, but her eyes tracked Mafuyu until the door closed.

Location: The Elevator to the Surface

The ascent was long. As the lift rose, the oppressive humidity of the depths faded, replaced by the cool, clean air of the surface.

When the doors opened at the Opera Epiclese, the sunlight hit them like a physical blow.

"The sun!" **Tsukasa** threw his arms wide, spinning on the dock. "I have missed you, celestial sphere! The Star returns to the heavens!"

"Finally," **Ena** slumped against the railing, taking a deep breath. "No more underwater pressure. No more meka noises. I feel like I can breathe again."

"We have a mission," **Haruka** reminded them, checking the time. "We need to get to the Palais Mermonia before Neuvillette leaves for the day."

Location: Palais Mermonia - Chief Justice’s Office

The Melusine receptionist, **Sedene**, nodded to them. "Monsieur Neuvillette is expecting you. He received word of your release."

They entered the office. It was just as cold and imposing as before.

Neuvillette stood by the window, watching the rain fall over the Court. The Hydro Dragon was weeping again.

"Traveler," Neuvillette turned. "And the Expedition Team. I trust your time in the Fortress was... educational."

"It was moist," Tsukasa summarized.

Aether stepped forward. He pulled out the sealed letter.

"Wriothesley told us to give this to you. His eyes only."

Neuvillette took the letter. He inspected the seal. With a precise motion, he broke the wax and unfolded the parchment.

The room was silent as he read.

His expression didn't change. He didn't frown. He didn't gasp. But the air pressure in the room dropped significantly. The rain outside intensified, drumming harder against the glass.

He read the section about the Primordial Sea leak. He read the section about the Whale. And he read the section about the **Troupe's Immunity**.

'Outlanders,' Neuvillette thought. *'Beings untouched by the sins of this world.'*

He folded the letter and placed it inside his coat pocket.

He looked at the troupe. His pale lilac eyes were unreadable, but there was a new weight behind them.

"I see," Neuvillette said softly. "So the situation is... critical."

"Monsieur Neuvillette?" **Ichika** asked nervously. "Is there anything we can do?"

"No," Neuvillette said immediately.

He walked back to his desk.

"Leave," Neuvillette ordered.

"Huh?" **Paimon** blinked. "You're kicking us out?"

"Leave this building," Neuvillette said, his voice firm but not angry. "Go back to the Hotel Debord. Stay in your rooms. Do not speak of the Fortress to anyone. Do not speak of the water to anyone."

"But—" **Tsukasa** started.

"This is not a request," Neuvillette looked at them, and for a second, the vertical pupils of a dragon were visible. "The information you brought... changes the nature of the trial. I must prepare."

He gestured to the door.

"Go. Rest. You will be summoned when the time is right."

The troupe exchanged glances. Haruka nodded to Aether. They knew when they were being dismissed for their own safety.

"Let's go," Haruka whispered.

They left the office. As the heavy doors closed behind them, **Mafuyu** looked back.

She saw Neuvillette staring at the letter again, his hand resting on the glass of the window, as if trying to hold back the rain with his touch alone.

Location: Outside Palais Mermonia

They stood on the wet pavement.

"He kicked us out," Ena muttered. "Just like that."

"He is protecting us," Mafuyu said. "The letter... it contained the truth about us. About our immunity. If the people knew there were humans who couldn't dissolve... they would panic. Or they would hate us."

"Or the Fatui would target us," Haruka added.

"So we are back to waiting in the wings," Tsukasa sighed, adjusting his scarf against the damp wind. "The calm before the climax."

"Let's go to the hotel," Aether said. "We need to be ready. If Neuvillette is preparing... then the final trial is coming soon."

Chapter End Notes

thanks for 39 kudos

san kyu

Chapter 144: Chapter 114: The Tailor of the Court

Location: Court of Fontaine - Quartier Lyonnais

"We have been ordered to 'lay low'," Tsukasa sighed, leaning against a lamppost. "But laying low is boring! A Star needs an audience, not a hotel room!"

"We can't leave the city," Aether reminded him. "Neuvillette was specific. But... Paimon says we can walk around the shopping district. Just don't cause a scene."

"Ooh! Shopping!" Paimon cheered. "Maybe we can buy snacks with our prison wages!"

They wandered down the elegant streets of the Court. The fashion here was distinct—corsets, top hats, intricate lace. It made their Inazuman "Traveler's Attire" (gifted by Ayaka) stand out.

They stopped in front of a high-end boutique. The sign read: **Chioriya Boutique**.

Standing outside, inspecting a mannequin with a critical glare, was a woman with dual blades on her hip and a measuring tape around her neck. She had an aura that screamed *'do not waste my time.'*

Chiori.

She turned as the group approached. Her eyes swept over them—scanning Tsukasa's coat, Ichika's armor, and Haruka's sash.

"Hmph," Chiori scoffed.

Tsukasa froze. "Excuse me? Did you just scoff at the Teyvat Expedition Team?"

"I scoffed at the stitching," Chiori stated, walking up to them. She pinched the sleeve of Tsukasa's coat. "Inazuman silk. High quality. Commissioned by the Kamisato Clan, I assume? Only they have access to this weave."

"Correct!" Tsukasa beamed. "It is a gift from the Shiroasagi Himegimi!"

"It's decent work," Chiori admitted. "But it's not suited for the humidity of Fontaine. The lining is already sagging. And the color palette clashes with the urban environment. You look like a walking firework."

She moved to Haruka and Ichika.

"Functional armor," Chiori nodded. "But the joints are stiff. You," she poked Ichika, "you rely on heavy swings. This shoulder pad is restricting your range of motion by at least 15 degrees."

Then, she looked at **Ena**.

Ena was wearing a simple blouse and skirt she had bought at a general store after her ocean fall. It was generic, ill-fitting, and definitely not combat-ready.

Chiori frowned. The temperature on the street seemed to drop.

"And *you*," Chiori pointed a gloved finger at Ena. "You are the sore thumb."

"H-Hey!" Ena stepped back, self-conscious. "I just bought these! They were on sale!"

"It shows," Chiori said ruthlessly. "You look like you fell out of a laundry basket. If you are traveling with *them*—" she gestured to the battle-hardened troupe, "—you need gear that won't tear the moment a Meka looks at you funny."

She turned and walked back into her shop.

"Get inside. All of you. I'm not letting you walk around my city looking like a fashion disaster."

Location: Chioriya Boutique

They were ushered into the fitting room. It was filled with fabrics of every color, sketches, and the smell of expensive dye.

"Wait," Haruka said, checking the price tags on a dress. "We... we can't afford this. This is a designer boutique. We spent our Mora on supplies."

"Did I ask for payment?" Chiori stood behind a counter, sketching rapidly.

"You... didn't?" Ichika blinked.

"Consider it a professional courtesy," Chiori said, not looking up. "I heard the news. The Vision Hunt Decree is over. The Sakoku Decree is lifted. Ships are sailing from Inazuma again."

She paused, her pencil stopping.

"I left Inazuma because it was stifling. But... it is still my home. You opened the gates. My fabrics can travel freely now. That is worth more to me than Mora."

She looked at Ena.

"But I wasn't there," Ena said, holding her arm. "They opened Inazuma. I just... fell out of the sky a few days ago. I didn't help."

"Does it matter?" Chiori walked over, holding a bolt of hydro-resistant fabric. "You are part of the set now. A designer never leaves a canvas unfinished."

She threw the fabric at Ena.

"Go try that on. And don't come out until you look like an artist who can fight."

The Reveal

An hour later, the curtain was pulled back.

The Refined Troupe.

- **Tsukasa:** His coat was tailored to be sharper, fitted with Fontainian brass buttons and hydro-repellent coating. It looked less like a costume and more like a commander's uniform. *"Magnificent! I feel aerodynamic!"*
- **Ichika:** The heavy shoulder plates were replaced with flexible, articulated metal that matched her blue theme. She swung her arm. *"It's... so much lighter."*
- **Haruka:** Her outfit was streamlined, adding a half-cape that added flair to her spins without getting in the way. *"It moves with me. Like a dance partner."*
- **Mafuyu:** Her hood was reinforced, and the fabric was treated to dampen sound (at her request). It gave her a silhouette like a shadow.

And **Ena**.

She stepped out shyly.

She wore a combat-ready artist's ensemble. A sturdy, paint-stained apron made of armored leather over a stylish blouse. Her belt was equipped with pouches for her Hydro ink vials. Her boots were heavy, designed for traction. She looked... cool.

"Well?" Ena asked, twirling a lock of hair. "Is it... okay?"

"You look like a main character!" Tsukasa gave a thumbs up.

"It suits you, Ena," Haruka smiled. "You look like you belong with us."

"Not bad," Chiori crossed her arms, a rare smile touching her lips. "Now get out. I have actual paying customers to attend to."

Location: Café Lucerne (Evening)

They sat at an outdoor table, enjoying tea and cakes in their new clothes. The sun was setting, casting long shadows over the Court.

Ena looked at her new gloves. She looked at the sword at her hip.

"So," Ena said, breaking the silence. "Chiori said you guys 'opened Inazuma'. And Alice said you fought a dragon."

She looked at the group.

"I've been... really confused. And scared. Can you tell me? What exactly did you guys *do* before I got here?"

Tsukasa's eyes lit up. He stood on his chair.

"Aha! You wish for the recap episode! The synopsis of our grand journey!"

"Sit down, Senpai," Ichika pulled him back. "But... yeah. We should tell her."

And so, they told her.

They told her about **Mondstadt**—about Dvalin, the Holy Lyre, and Venti's song. They told her about **Liyue**—about the Rite of Parting, the Golden House, and the Jade Chamber falling into the sea. They told her about **Inazuma**—about the Vision Hunt, the Resistance, Teppei's death, and the duel with Signora. They told her about **Sumeru**—about the Samsara, the rescue of Nahida, and the battle against the False God Scaramouche.

Ena listened. She didn't interrupt. She just listened as her friends described a journey of gods, monsters, and tragedies.

"You..." Ena whispered, looking at them with wide eyes. "You guys really are heroes."

"We are just trying to survive," Mafuyu said, sipping her tea.

"And Akito?" Ena asked, her voice trembling. "Where does he fit in?"

Ichika looked down at her tea.

"He was in the Chasm," Ichika said softly. "We fought him. He... he's fighting for the Abyss, Ena. But he hesitated. We think... we think he's still in there."

Ena gripped her cup.

"He's alive," Ena said firmly. "That's enough for now. If he's alive... I can yell at him later."

She looked at the troupe. Her friends. They looked different—stronger, sharper, worn down by the world. But they were still them.

"Okay," Ena took a deep breath. "I'm caught up. No more being the confused new girl. Whatever happens next... I'm helping."

Just then, the ground trembled.

Not an earthquake. A deep, resonant vibration from the earth.

"What was that?" Haruka stood up.

A siren began to wail across the city.

"ATTENTION CITIZENS. RISING WATER LEVELS DETECTED IN POISSON. EVACUATION PROTOCOLS INITIATED."

"Poisson?" Aether stood up. "That's Navia’s hometown!"

"The Prophecy," Mafuyu said, her new coat fluttering in the sudden wind. "It is starting."

End Notes

i made this fanfic, because after reading a bunch of Project Sekai and Genshin Impact fanfics, most of them stay stale or just bland in my taste.

I want some casts of PJSK, a taste of pure Genshin Impact Lore, like this one!

I hope that this fanfic would be the catalyst of Project Sekai x Genshin Impact fanfictions moving on.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!